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PEG, THE RAKE

By "RITA." Author of
"KITTY THE RAG," "PETTICOAT
LOOSE," "ADRIENNE," "THE
SINNER," "A WOMAN OF
SAMARIA," &c., &c.



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EMIL GRATZL

PEG, THE RAKE

CHAPTER I

"IN EVERY LIFE A STORY . . ."

"I'll go nap," said Miss Em.

"Get it," said the doctor, glancing up from his own hand with an expression of doubt and disappointment.

Miss Em's slender white fingers lingered lovingly over the cards while three pair of eyes watched keenly her first move. She put down an ace of hearts with an air of defiance.

"Bravo, Miss Em!" said Captain Kearney, usually known to friends and foes alike as "Paddy." "Where hearts are concerned, you're pretty safe to win!"

"Well, *you* haven't one to lose at any rate," said Miss Em, flashing her grey Irish eyes at him as he covered her ace with the five of spades. "But remember, Dr. MacShamus, win or lose, this is my last game to-night. Gracious! 'tis ten o'clock already," with a glance at the black marble clock on the mantel-shelf. "You know what my father is! He was in a precious temper, too, when I came out; and I fear absence won't be making *his* heart grow fonder."

"Ah! don't be minding him," said Dr. MacShamus, to whom Miss Em's abundant years of discretion made such allusions unimportant. "Your trick, of course?"

Miss Em smiled significantly, and led the king of the same suit, followed by the queen, ten, and ace of clubs.

"Ah, faith! 'tis nap sure enough," said the doctor, with pretended disgust. "Fortune's favoured you to-night, Miss Em!"

The lady addressed carefully gathered up her winnings with a keen glance at the gold gleaming here and there amidst the pile. She never cared to play unless the stakes were high, though she professed to love cards for their own sake entirely.

"Ah, doctor, you're disappointed," she said, as she closed her purse. "But you needn't begrudge me the luck to-night. I sorely need it, and 'tisn't 'Miss Em' would have gone nap unless she felt sure of getting it."

"The old gentleman turned rusty again?" inquired Captain Kearney, twirling his fair moustache, and watching his late opponent with the interest and amusement she never failed to arouse in him.

"Is he ever anything else?" said Miss Em, with a shrug of shapely shoulders under a well-fitting but well-worn gown. "I expect there'll be no getting off from Carrig-duve for me this many a day. Sorry I am now I came over for Christmas; for with a stepmother who preaches filial duty and then makes your home a hell, 'tis enough to try a saint."

"Indeed it is, my dear," said Mrs. MacShamus, with a vague idea that

it was about time she "took up her parable," and spoke. The doctor's conversational powers usually exercised a wholesome check upon her own.

"But you wouldn't be calling yourself a saint, Miss Em?" interposed that loquacious individual. "Shure, 'tis a chip of the old block you are, and always will be, I'll take my oath o' that. Why, don't I remember——"

"No tales now, doctor!" interrupted Miss Em hastily. "Even the devil's not as black as he's painted!"

"And perhaps the saints aren't as white," said Captain Kearney. "You'll let me have the honour of escorting you home, Miss Em?"

"Indeed, you're very kind," she answered, with a glance at the handsome, good-humoured face. There was a faint pink flush on her own, born of nervousness, not embarrassment. Miss Em's *savoir faire* was proverbial.

She walked over to the large old-fashioned fireplace, and began to smooth her hair at the mirror. It was brown in hue and with a natural ripple in it, and was worn in a somewhat old-fashioned style, which her juveniles termed "window curtains," but Miss Em was wise enough to know that a fringe would only vulgarise a face that could not only bear but look distinguished under a severe style of hair-dressing. She gave an adjusting touch to a rebellious lock or two, and a cautious pat to the elaborate coils which graced the back of her head, and which would have taxed even a child's credulity as to being the natural growth of any human cranium.

She was a well-preserved woman of forty, though with the advantage of appearing a good five years less than her real age. Her friends on looking back for her (a thing Miss Em never cared to do for herself) produced from a traditional past a goodly store of evidence as to her beauty and conquests, but neither one nor other had resulted in anything more satisfactory than "old maidenhood" and a career of adventure at which she herself often jested in public.

Her private estimate of herself and her life was locked safely away in the recesses of her own heart. Not even her nearest and dearest (and Miss Em had a power of attracting and retaining very warm affections) ever guessed the feelings that lay concealed beneath that gay and reckless exterior—or the true history of a girlhood that had won for her the *sobriquet* of "Peg, the Rake."

There are turned-down pages in most lives. There were one or two in Miss Em's, which, even now, she shrank from re-opening: pages thumbed and worn, and discoloured with many tears; pages in a dusty volume which had its own special niche, its own secret abiding-place. The volume of that youth whose requiem she had long since heard in the strains of a useless regret.

"Come, Miss Em, you're beautiful enough," said Dr. MacShamus jestingly. "And who's to see you to-night? Sorra a bit of moonlight or starlight either is there. 'Tis your own eyes you must trust to."

"Miss Em wouldn't need any better lantern," said Captain Kearney gallantly, as the lady in question adjusted her bonnet, and slipped into a shabby though serviceable sealskin. "By the way," he added suddenly, "are you going to Dublin for the Kellys' ball? Because my leave's up, and, as I've to return there, we might travel the same day."

"What day do you go?" asked Miss Em diplomatically—she had received no invitation for the ball, but the very hearing of it aroused a determination to be present at whatever cost. These little strategies were just what she enjoyed.

"On Tuesday," answered the captain, rising, as he saw she was ready. "The day before, you know." (Miss Em did not know, but made a mental note of the date.) "It's to be most brilliant," he added; "no expense spared, and half Dublin asked."

Again that faint pink flush coloured Miss Em's somewhat worn cheek—it was born of natural indignation this time. Half Dublin asked, and her name omitted! Surely her popularity was not on the wane.

"Tuesday would suit me very well, Paddy," she said, drawing on her gloves, apparently oblivious of the fact that the doctor had brewed her a glass of punch, which was steaming with inviting fragrance on the table. "We can arrange time later on."

"Mine is at your disposal, of course," answered Paddy, accepting a glass of the punch from the doctor, and offering it with polite alacrity to her. "Now don't shake your head, Miss Em. Shure, this wouldn't hurt a babe, and it'll keep the cold out. You know the doctor's recipe by this time?"

"'Twould be mighty strange if she didn't," observed Dr. MacShamus, with a good-humoured twinkle in his eyes; "for many's the time she's had the benefit of it."

Miss Em accepted the glass without further demur, and edged cautiously in the direction of Mrs. MacShamus.

"I'm glad to be able to pay off my debt so soon, dear," she whispered, slipping a sovereign into the good lady's palm. "If it hadn't been for the loan of this, 'tis little chance I'd have had of getting off to Dublin, or anywhere else. I can't screw a penny out of the guv'nor now. 'Tis meaner and meaner he gets, and little to be wondered at considering who he's got to back him up. If it wasn't for my luck at cards I don't know where I'd be!"

"Poor dear," said Mrs. MacShamus sympathetically. "'Tis a shame to be bullied and badgered like a child, and at your age, too!"

The good lady often spoilt an admirable intention by a *mal à propos* remark. Miss Em, however, was too pachydermatous to feel such random shots as anything but the merest touch on the target of vanity. Time was when they would have penetrated deeply enough; but the world and its lessons had been an efficient cure, and her unfailing good nature and unconsciousness of offence were one of the secrets of her social success.

"I'm afraid I can't stay to gossip any more," she said now; "the doors will be locked and barred as it is, but I asked Quinlan to let me in by the little side entrance—she's such a good creature, and willing to do anything in the world for me. Oh, I'd almost forgotten"—and she glanced half nervously in the direction of the two men, who were now discussing agrarian outrages in excited tones—"do you happen to know if Lady Pat is in Dublin? I've not heard from her for ages."

"She was there for Christmas," said Mrs. MacShamus. "The O'Briens told me that; but she wasn't meaning to make any long stay, she wants to go abroad again."

Miss Em's grey eyes flashed eagerly. "No? You don't say so? But her niece was so ill, and she never travels alone!"

"Maybe the poor thing is better now," hazarded Mrs. MacShamus as an agreeable suggestion.

"Maybe she's not, and I pray she mayn't be," was the thought in Miss Em's mind as she cheerfully echoed that suggestion and bade farewell to host and hostess.

"Poor dear Miss Em!" sighed the doctor's wife, as the door closed upon her at last.

"Ah, faith! you needn't be wasting your pity there!" answered her husband, planting himself, glass in hand, on the hearthrug. "Now just tell me what she wormed out of you to-night, and I'll give you a sketch of her manœuvres for the spring campaign."

"That's not a kind way of speaking of her, Jerry," said his wife rebukingly. "I'm sure the poor thing is as innocent as a child, and very hardly used too. There's neither man nor woman could say a good word for that stepmother of hers. Whatever possessed Mr. O'Hara to marry her, and at his age too, beats me entirely."

"Marriage," said Dr. MacShamus oracularly, "is just the one action in life that a man's friends never *can* see any reason for! I can give a pretty good guess though for the reason of O'Hara's marriage, badly as it's turned out."

"Why, Jerry, you've always said——"

"Pooh, pooh," he interposed hastily. "And why shouldn't I be saying it? I know what women's tongues are. Was I going to tell you anything that would be half over the parish the next day? But the marriage is an old story now, and it didn't do what it was intended, more's the pity."

"But what was that?" persisted Mrs. MacShamus, who when she once seized upon an idea was loth to relinquish it.

The doctor sipped his punch slowly and thoughtfully and regarded his spouse with an air of doubt, as if uncertain of her discretion in any matter of marital confidence. "What was it?" he said at last. "Well, only that Peg, as they called her, was getting a bit too wild, and needed curb, and if ever there was a woman capable of clapping it on and keeping it tight, then Mrs. O'Hara No. 2 is that woman."

"Miss Em hates her," said the old lady; "and she's quite turned her father's heart away from her. 'Tis a shame, and his only child, too! But, Jerry," she resumed, harking back to a long-pent-up curiosity on this subject, "since we're speaking of the O'Haras, do tell me what the story was about Miss Em, I never could get the rights of it. Not that I believe there was anything wrong, though people do say——"

"There you go! Women's tongues and women's gossip!" exclaimed the doctor. "And as if I'd be adding to it! Bygones are bygones; old heads won't grow on young shoulders, nor young blood run cool and slow in young veins. There's a wild strain in all the O'Hara lot and has been for generations. It wasn't likely Peg would escape it. She was a beautiful girl, too—'tis a pity she didn't make a good match when she had the chance."

"There's hope for her yet," said Mrs. MacShamus consolingly. "She's much admired, and no one could say but what she's a fine woman and as light a dancer as a girl, God bless her!"

"Do you suppose a sensible man would be marrying a woman of forty because she could dance still?" asked the doctor sarcastically. "What fools you take us for! He'd have to get something better than that for his bargain, let me tell you."

Mrs. MacShamus looked crestfallen, though she was well used to snubbing. "You do snap one up so, Jerry," she said plaintively. "Of course, I wasn't meaning Miss Em would get a husband only because of her figure and her dancing. She's so good-hearted and companionable any man might be glad of such a wife."

"What was she asking you before she left?" inquired the doctor hastily, changing the subject.

Mrs. MacShamus cast her thoughts back with some difficulty. "She repaid me the loan of a sovereign," she exclaimed at last, unclasping her hand, where the coin still reposed. "And she talked about Dublin."

"Dublin? Ah, I thought so," interrupted the doctor sharply. "She's had no invitation to the Kellys' ball, I'd stake my life on it, but all the same she means to be there. You'll hear something to-morrow."

"How can she go if she's not been asked?" inquired Mrs. MacShamus, with an innocent unconsciousness of manœuvres and diplomacy which struck the sharp-witted doctor as aggravating.

"How?—how?" he repeated. "Can't a woman do anything if she makes up her mind to it? I'm not up to the ways and means she'll employ, but I'd bet willingly on the result. Come, drink up your punch; you're letting it get cold, and there's no more boiling water."

Mrs. MacShamus took out a netted silk purse from her pocket and carefully placed Miss Em's sovereign therein; after which she slowly sipped the contents of her tumbler, but her mind was ill at ease.

"I told her Lady Patricia was in Dublin," she remarked, with true feminine irrelevance.

The doctor started. His thoughts had drifted far away from Miss Em and her concerns, to professional matters.

For a moment he surveyed his wife with a sort of wondering admiration. Then he laughed outright.

"Trust a child or a fool to cut the Gordian knot of any difficulty!" he exclaimed. "My dear Theresa, let me compliment you for once. You've proved yourself an uncommonly clever woman!"

Mrs. MacShamus regarded him with bewilderment. She never was quite sure whether her husband was laughing at her or not.

"I wish you'd explain, Jerry," she said nervously. "What was there clever in my mentioning about Lady Pat, or that her niece was still delicate, and mightn't be able to go abroad this winter?"

"Go on—go on," said the doctor approvingly.

"But that was all."

"All? are you sure? Well, you've not done badly; but I'll leave Miss Em to thank you later on."

"I—I do wish I could understand you, Jerry," said the old lady plaintively, as she rose. "But you quite bewilder my poor brains; I never was clever, you know; I'm not like you. I've often wondered why you married me."

"Faith, and so have I!" said Dr. MacShamus, *sotto voce*. His natural and national politeness prevented the retort from being audible and hurting the worthy lady's feelings; but a long experience of feminine peculiarities as exemplified by patients in their respective relationship to the opposite sex, had often led him to speculate on the reasons of marriage. A man was so much better off without it. What possessed him to tie himself up, forfeit freedom, and burden himself with a score of responsibilities when he might just as well keep out of them?

For himself there was always a professional excuse. A married doctor was more popular with lady patients than an unmarried one; but for the generality of mankind no such necessity existed.

He watched his meek spouse gather up her belongings—work-bag,

spectacles and shawl—with which she always travelled from room to room. Then he opened the door, bade her good-night and returned to his easy-chair by the fire, and those reflections, moralisings, speculations, what you will, in which men indulge in that quiet half-hour sacred to nicotine and slippers.

Fair goddess of the smoking-room, how much you have to answer for! What dreams of days long dead, of hours both sweet and sad, hopeful and hopeless, of memories and regrets and wasted hopes, float phantom-like about those faint cloud whiffs from weed or briar!

The living woman on whom the door has closed little dreams of the rival who takes her place—a place made sacred by the memories of youth; a slip of a girl perhaps in an old washed muslin, the sunlight on her bright hair, the light of love in her shy eyes, yet lovelier and more dear than the beauty in diamonds and satin who bears the name she should have borne. How sweet she looks through the dim haze of long past years! How low and tender was *her* voice, how glad her welcome, how sorrowful her parting words! The vision fades; the eyes that gaze on it grow misty, old and world-weary as they are. Pshaw! away with such fancies; they have had their day; they are buried with the hopes that faded like those flowers exchanged, those vows whose “forever” worldly pride or ambition made so brief.

But it was no girlish sweetheart who haunted the good doctor's dreams to-night. Life, even in youth, had meant for him hard work, stern discipline, and many struggles. He had a genuine love of his profession, but every step upwards had cost him a heavy price. A country doctor has to put up with much that his professional brethren in large cities never encounter. Dr. MacShamus as a young man had been enthusiastic, zealous, and given to innovations more or less daring. But the small circle of humanity among whom his duties lay were obstinately averse to reform in any shape, and a long battle with prejudice and superstition had left him a somewhat soured and cynical man. He had married one of his own patients when he was well past the season of romance, and woman meant simply for him the “sex feminine,” who called forth the alternate compassion and cynicism of his nature. His wife had brought him some money, and they had never widened their dual responsibilities by the obligation of parentage. In the present stage of their history they were both well on in years, very comfortably off, and fairly popular with their neighbours, rich and poor alike.

The doctor himself was valued by reason of his medical skill no less than by his being the safe recipient of many family secrets and many queer stories. They were never repeated; and dearly as Irish folk love gossip, none know better how to appreciate a safe confidant.

It was a page of some such family history that Dr. MacShamus was scanning to-night as he sat alone by the fire and watched the smoke-clouds curl about his head from that well-beloved briar between his lips. A “dark queer page,” he called it, and one on which he had often speculated. It concerned Miss Em, and was known only to her father and himself,—at least, so he imagined. Buried in a grave of twenty years was there now any chance that it would have a resurrection? He hardly thought it possible, yet he wondered vaguely why it should trouble him to-night. There had been nothing to recall it, nothing to wake up the old fear. Yet why was she so anxious to go to Dublin, and why the pretence that she had received that invitation to the Kellys' ball?

"There's no making her out," he muttered half aloud, as he shook out the ashes of his pipe and replaced it reluctantly on the rack above the mantel-shelf. "And I'm doubtful if even forty years have taught her prudence or discretion. Yet, what the devil does it matter to me? She surely knows her own business best."

He stood contemplating the grey ashes of the dying fire for a few moments, still following out a train of thought. "After all, would it have been better to let her have her own way?" he said thoughtfully. "The blackguard might have married her; and there's no knowing but the property mayn't fall to him yet!"

CHAPTER II

"IN EVERY HEART A GRIEF."

Miss EM and her escort stepped boldly forth into the dark, dreary night. She accepted his proffered arm, and for some moments they walked along in silence.

The chiming of the church clock sounded loud and distinct and aroused an exclamation of surprise from her.

"So late! Why, they'll all have gone to bed—and the fuss and botheration!"

"Why do you mind them?" asked Captain Kearney. "Surely you can act as you please?"

"I can, of course; but I'm of a peaceable disposition and hate rows and scenes. Acting 'as I please' means both."

"I don't wonder you're so seldom at home. You'll have a good time in Dublin, I hope."

"Yes; Lady Pat's house is a delightful one to stay at. You do feel in touch with the world, and the best people and the best things in it. What a charming woman she is!"

"Charming, indeed! I'm so glad you're going there. Take care; did you step into the mud?"

"Very nearly," said Miss Em, with a little catch in her breath. "Ugh! how I hate these dirty country roads! I'm very sorry to be giving you all this trouble, Paddy; you're coming a good deal out of your way."

"Oh, I'll take the short cut back," said the young man good-humouredly. "Don't be mentioning trouble, Miss Em. You know I'd walk ten times to do you a service."

"I know you're very good to me," said Miss Em gratefully; "and I'm sure it's little cause you have to be so. 'Tis not as if I was young and beautiful any longer. Time is very hard on women, Paddy."

"But there are other charms besides youth and beauty," said the young Irishman gallantly. "And *you'll* never be needing admirers, or friends either, as long as you live, that I'll swear."

"What are those lights yonder?" asked Miss Em suddenly. "Not at Castle Lustrell, surely! Yes; I do believe they are. Do you know if they're entertaining to-night, Paddy?"

"I heard some word of a dinner-party, but I'm not sure."

"And they didn't ask you—your own uncle, too? Surely that's very strange."

"Well, you know, we're not the best of friends," said the young man,

in a somewhat embarrassed manner. "The last quarrel was a bad one; indeed, if it weren't for Molly, I'd have made it final, I think. The old fellow was downright insulting. I hate to have his money thrown at my head every time I go there—just as if I cared for it."

"No, 'tis Molly I know," said Miss Em shrewdly; "but that amounts to nearly the same thing in her father's eyes."

"Why, he's threatened to disinherit her a hundred times! There's nothing on earth to prevent him. Indeed, he might be marrying again, ne's always talking about it."

"Is he really?" exclaimed Miss Em eagerly. "I shouldn't have thought he'd ever do that. After such a taste of matrimony as he's had, too!"

"Isn't it wonderful that Molly should be so sweet and lovely with such parents?"

"Faith, 'tis a mercy we don't all take after our progenitors," said Miss Em bitterly. "They entail quite enough upon us by giving us life, without their tempers and infirmities being part of the bargain. Ah, 'tis a weary world, Paddy dear; often and often have I wished myself well out of it!"

There was such a hopeless ring in her voice that the young man looked at her with genuine surprise. Miss Em had so long meant to him the embodiment of all that was bright, cheery, and reckless, that he could not understand any darker side to the brightness, any shadow to the sunny, careless indifference habitually shown to life and its responsibilities.

"I always thought you were on such good terms with life," he said.

"Because I get the best I can out of it! . . . Hist! Stay a moment. What was that?"

They had opened a small gate and were proceeding carefully up the leafless avenue when she uttered this exclamation.

It was too dark for Captain Kearney to see the look of apprehension that had suddenly sprung into her grey eyes, but no darkness could prevent his noticing the sudden tremor of the hand that clasped his arm. It struck him as strange that Miss Em should be revealing herself in a new light to him to-night—the light of the nervous female who starts at shadows and hears in a chance footstep the ominous sound of assault or robbery.

"'Tis only a falling twig from the trees," he said reassuringly. "Why, Miss Em, *you've* nothing to fear from moonlighters or 'the bhoys,' have you?"

She laughed somewhat hysterically.

"No, no; of course not. Only I fancied I saw a figure moving there, just between the stems."

"Then your sight is better than mine by a long way," said the captain reassuringly. "I'm sure there's no one. But I'll see you safe up to the hall door, never fear."

"'Tis the side way I'm going in," said Miss Em, lowering her voice. "I won't be disturbing them since it's so late."

"All right," he said, giving her hand a reassuring pressure; and they stumbled on together in the brooding gloom, and over a path that offered many impediments and obstructions. Unworn flints stood out in sharp relief from grassy ruts, the low, bare boughs almost touched their heads, the sighing wind was like a dirge heard in the starless gloom. The key-note of desolation was sharply struck by the whole

desolate surroundings, and even Paddy Kearney's habitual cheerfulness was chilled into silence and foreboding as he assisted his equally silent companion to the entrance she had indicated.

Two conspirators could scarce have parted with more mystery and caution than did this strangely assorted couple. The captain went cautiously back over the rough path, while Miss Em herself approached a window from which a faint light gleamed, and tapped softly three times on the pane. The whole of the house was wrapped in darkness and every window barred and shuttered; but at this signal the door was gently opened, revealing an elderly woman, who stepped forward, shading the candle with one hand and peering intently into the darkness.

"'Tis yourself, Miss Peg, dear."

"Of course, who else should it be?" whispered Miss Em, slipping quietly in, and closing the door with alacrity, and yet with a noiselessness born of long practice. "Have they gone up?" she continued, as the bolt slipped quietly into its well-greased socket.

"Yes, alannah, this half-hour and more. Spake low or they'll hear ye. They don't know you're out. Sure, the lies I've been after telling; but then, 'twas in a good cause—glory be to God! Faith 'tis the mistress is in the divil of a temper to-night."

Miss Em shrugged her shoulders and took the candle, gathering her skirts carefully about her.

"Good-night, Quinlan," she said in a whisper, as she glanced up the well-worn carpeted stairs.

"Good-night, and God bless you, me dear," whispered back the old woman, watching her progress upwards with anxious eyes. Step by step Miss Em advanced, neither rustle nor creak betraying her movements. Long habit had made her aware what stair was to be treated with deference and what was "noise-proof." She reached the upper landing, nodded triumphantly to the old woman, and disappeared.

"Shure 'tis a shame to see the creature sneaking into her own father's house, for all the world as if she'd neither right nor place in it; and well I know 'tis herself ought to be mistress," muttered Quinlan, who had been nurse, housekeeper, and general factotum in the family for over thirty years. To her, Miss Peg was still a girl, still the wilful, reckless, extravagant creature, whose torn frocks she had mended, whose faults she had screened, and whose escapades she had hidden or excused. That she had driven her mother to despair and half broken her father's heart by her flirtations, extravagances, and heedlessness were all but venial sins in the eyes of the doting old woman. Indeed, it is probable that but for her Peg would have been a better child, and "Miss Em" a better woman.

No sooner had the door closed on her, than, with a sigh of relief, she placed the candlestick on the dressing-table and sank into an arm-chair beside it. It was curious to note how the whole face changed, as if a mask had been removed. Lines and shadows—thrown into strong relief by the flickering light—revealed with unsparing cruelty the ravages of Time. An expression of intense weariness and depression darkened the still brilliant eyes, and the lips, usually so gay and smiling, grew set and stern. Miss Em looked every day and hour of her age as she sat there, wrapped in thoughts that seemed far from pleasant; her wearied brain busy with scheming; and yet something within her, of which she was dimly conscious,

despising those very schemes, and at once condemning and ridiculing the end for which she worked as the ignoble thing she knew it to be.

Suddenly she rose and threw off her bonnet and sealskin. Then with an impatient glance at the mirror she went over to a cupboard, unlocked it and took out two candles. These she placed in a pair of broken china candlesticks on the dressing-table and lit them.

"To think," she muttered contemptuously, "that the very lights are begrudged one at Carrig-duve! How times have changed, and oh! how I hate and detest meanness, for 'tis nothing else! There's money enough and to spare, of that I'm certain; but *that* woman would skin a flint if ever woman would." The three candles made quite a brilliant illumination round the mirror, and the kindly shadows left the general shabbiness of the large room unrevealed.

Miss Em stood for a moment contemplating her own reflection.

"I to be scheming for balls and parties!" she exclaimed, with a short bitter laugh. "I! and yet what would my life be if it weren't for these poor excitements? Home, love, youth, beauty, all gone from me now, and there's nothing to replace them—nothing! Fifteen, ay, even ten years ago, what a different face looked back at me from that very glass! what a different heart throbbed in this same breast! But I can't give in. I *won't*. I'd sooner die than acknowledge myself beaten; and I'll make something of my life yet! Forty! why, it's not such an age after all! and I don't look it always."

She unfastened the massive braids at the back of her head and laid them carefully on the dressing-table. Then shook down her own hair, which made a soft screen for her face, the ends curling naturally on her shoulders. Time was when those thick rippling curls had been a charm and delight; but their sheen and abundance had departed, and though Miss Em could still make what she termed "a brave show in the front," the aid of art had long been called in to supplement the scanty scalp-locks of which the years had taken a too generous toll.

"I want some new plaits badly," she said with a heavy sigh, as she held the false and true together, and surveyed the advertisement of "quantity not quality" with undisguised contempt. "But, indeed, if it comes to that I want a great many things that I stand small chance of getting. I ought to have a new gown for the Kellys' ball. That peach silk I saw in Tierney's window would be the very thing. Lady Pat would get it, and Mrs. Coadey make it up for me by Tuesday, and the ball is on Wednesday. I could try it on, and there'd be a whole day for alterations, if they were needed, but Coadey knows my figure well enough. If only that bill wasn't owing. Could I borrow ten pounds, I wonder? My father thinks so much of Lady Pat; he might fork out a fiver, and there's Mrs. MacShamus, she's so good-natured. Well, it's worth trying. Let me see, how much did I win to-night?"

She drew out her purse and emptied its contents on the table. A little heap of silver and four gold sovereigns.

"Little enough," so ran on her reflections. "There's my fare to come out of it, and I can't be without money altogether, though Lady Pat is generosity itself. I wonder will she be willing to ask me? I ought to have my letter ready for Quinlan to catch the first post in the morning. She'll get it to-morrow night, and I should have the answer next day. Here goes,—'tis the bold player wins the game."

On a small table at the foot of the bed stood a supply of writing materials. Miss Em opened a blotter and commenced the letter forthwith. She wrote a fine dashing hand, and composition seemed to give her no trouble, for the words flowed as freely from her pen as, on occasion, they could from her lips.

"DEAR LADY PATRICIA" (ran the missive),—"I want to run up to Dublin next Tuesday for a few days, and I'm going to ask you to put me up, if it won't be *too* inconvenient. I've a little shopping to do, and some business matters to see to. Besides, I want the pleasure of a chat with you again, and to ask your valued advice on a *very important* matter."

"That will flatter her," thought Miss Em, pausing to read over the last sentence. "Lady Pat dearly loves to be consulted, not that I've really anything to ask her advice about, but that's no matter. I can invent something when I'm once there."

She hastily added a few more lines, signed, and closed the letter, and then proceeded to finish her toilet for the night.

The rain was falling heavily now, and the low "sough" of the wind had increased to a noisy bluster.

Miss Em shivered as she removed her dress and threw a warm crimson dressing-robe round her. Then slowly and thoughtfully she proceeded to brush her hair, pausing now and then to listen to the signs of storm without.

Was it only fancy, or did a sudden soft tapping sound at the window behind her?

She started; the brush fell from her hands; her white face and rigid figure betokened a wild terror, and her eyes rested on the white blind with an awful look of expectance and dread. But it remained motionless, and the sound was not repeated.

Gradually her features relaxed, the colour came back to her face and lips. "How foolish I am! 'tis only that old bough striking the glass. How often I've said I'll have it cut off!"

She sank into the chair. She was trembling so that she could not stand. "I don't know what's the matter with me to-night. My nerves seem all wrong. As if it were possible, . . . as if he would dare—ever again!"

Her thoughts broke off. She clasped her hands and bent her head on them, her whole attitude intent on eager listening.

But the pitiless rain alone sounded in the silence, and gradually the strained figure relaxed and she lifted her head with an air of relief.

CHAPTER III

PLOTS AND PLANS

CARRIG-DUVE was a large rambling old house that stood among acres of neglected grounds and ill-kept fields.

It spoke of desolation and decay within and without; but it had once breathed a very different tale, and been no less renowned for hospitality and splendour than its gorgeous rival Castle Lustrell. But with Mr. O'Hara's second marriage an entire change came over the establishment; servants were dismissed, carriages put down, entertainments abolished, and the whole elaborate domestic machinery ground down, so to speak, to powder, under the iron heel of a penurious mistress.

Rebellion, grumbling, defiance, all were unavailing. The second Mrs.

O'Hara was a woman of despotic will and furious temper; but a woman who never undertook a thing unless she determined to carry it out.

Desmond O'Hara was weak, and loved a quiet life. The result is easily imagined. He had married in order to put some controlling power over his household, which under Peg's management was an exemplification of riot, waste, and extravagance, and also in the hope that female influence might be beneficial to that young lady herself, seeing that he had no control and very little influence over her. He had not breathed a word of his intention until he was actually married, and the first Peg knew of it was on her return from one of her visits abroad, when to her wrath, fury, and disgust she found a new mistress in her place.

To say that there were battles, many and fierce, between the wilful, reckless girl and her determined stepmother is needless; but even Peg, spoilt and self-willed as she was, found that the enemy was too strong for open warfare, and that strategy would be her best weapon in the future. With all her wildness and recklessness the girl had a fund of common-sense to fall back upon, so she took counsel with herself as to the future, and formed a plan of action that had the merit of serving her own interests and spiting her enemy.

She had up to this time cared very little for the opinions of any of the numerous friends and acquaintances whom she alternately delighted or horrified by her vagaries. Now she commenced a cautious "weeding out" of the undesirable or useless among them, and put forth all the charm of manner, wit, and accomplishments with which she was gifted in order to make herself a welcome guest wherever it suited her purpose to stay.

It gradually dawned upon people's minds that beautiful Peg O'Hara was a very ill-used and persecuted creature; and a warmer welcome was given to the motherless girl, whose home was so wretched and whose lot so lonely, than even her own charms of mind and manner had once called forth. Thus Peg was less and less at home, though each visit there maddened her with the proofs of her stepmother's penurious management, her father's increasing helplessness, and the gradual disrepute into which the once brilliant and hospitable Carrig-duve had fallen.

Every one in the neighbourhood began to shun Mrs. O'Hara, and the fact did not improve that lady's sour and vengeful nature. It was openly averred that her treatment of her step-daughter had been shameful; the poor girl was literally driven from home, and deprived of all that she was justly entitled to. Peg, in fact, was a martyr, and Mrs. O'Hara a tyrant, besides being guilty of that inexcusable fault in Irish eyes—meanness.

The very beggars avoided Carrig-duve, and, as year after year passed on, the whole place began to acquire that aspect of desolation and neglect which speaks so eloquently of fallen fortunes.

But these same years brought many changes in their train. Young girls, Peg's contemporaries, married and settled down into contented matronhood and maternity, middle-aged women became dowagers; death stole silent-footed in and out of populous households, taking here one, and there another, and people began to wonder how it was that Peg O'Hara remained Peg O'Hara still. Offers she must have had in plenty, yet the twenties slipped into thirties, and they, one by one, dropped into the lap of the past, and still she manifested no intention of changing her condition.

Her friends began to look anxious. Younger and fairer and sprightlier rivals had sprung up, and though Peg held her own bravely, there was

effort now in the struggle, and anxiety in the little stratagems, and the girlish name was seldom heard, for she herself always desired new acquaintances to call her by Dr. MacShamus' pet appellation of "Miss Em," a familiar rendering of the more stately Emilia which graced her baptismal certificate.

If there was any romance in her past, any mystery connected with her reasons for preferring this wandering life when she might have "settled down" over and over again, no one but herself knew it. Conjectures were numerous, of course, and of hints and stories there was no lack, but no one was absolutely certain that any of them were correct; and as year after year drifted by, gossip grew weary of gossiping, and "Miss Em" of Carrig-duve seemed to have buried the youthful escapades of "Peg, the Rake," under a gravestone none cared to disturb.

* * * * *

The storm of the past night had been replaced by fitful sunshine whose rays lingered warmly over the breakfast-table and its appointments as Miss Em entered the room.

She kissed her father as she passed his chair, and nodded carelessly to her stepmother, who was presiding over cold and watery coffee and whose only matutinal greeting consisted of the remark: "Late as usual, Emilia! Will you never learn to remember that nine o'clock *means* nine o'clock in *my* establishment, whatever it may do in that of your fashionable friends!"

"Any letters?" inquired Miss Em carelessly, quite ignoring this observation. "Excuse my reading them, dad, will you? My coffee can't get much colder than it is, but I've asked Quinlan to keep back my slice of bacon in future until I come down. I *do* draw the line there."

Mrs. O'Hara shot a venomous glance at her step-daughter, and tightened her thin lips ominously, but Miss Em proceeded to open her letters with an utter disregard as to her opinion or presence. She pushed them aside as the old servant entered with the bacon and some fresh toast.

"Thanks, Quinlan," she said heartily. "I should fare badly if it wasn't for you, I'm thinking."

"You'd fare as well as your father and myself," interposed the stepmother sharply, "if you came to meals at the proper time."

"Never could be punctual to save my life," answered Miss Em coolly; "and I'm too old to begin now. But don't let me detain you," she added politely; "I see you've finished your—skilly, isn't it? I promise I won't take more than one lump of sugar. The butter, I see, you've measured out. You can lock up and give your orders if you wish."

A dull red flush came into Mrs. O'Hara's sallow cheek. Her eyes flashed venomously. But though the barb hit home, the ruling spirit was too strong for even the sharpest sarcasm to affect it for long. She proceeded to lock up the butter and sugar as she always did, and then left the room intent on what Miss Em called her "cheeseparing" preparations for the day.

As the door closed, Miss Em pushed her correspondence aside and glanced at her father. The faint winter sunlight falling on his wrinkled face and scant grey locks seemed like a sudden revelation to her.

"How old and feeble he looks!" she thought, with momentary tenderness. "It seems a shame to worry him, and yet these bills must be paid."

"Dad," she said gently, using the old girlish appellation instead of the more slangy term she had of late introduced, "I want to ask if you can

let me have my allowance a month earlier? I've got some bills to settle, and the people are worrying for payment."

"No, Em, I can't," said the old man pettishly. "You're always fore-stalling your money, and it throws my accounts all wrong. Besides, you've no business to run up bills. I've told you so a hundred times. Pay for what you get, or don't get it at all, that's the only way to avoid difficulties."

"But I can't pay for everything!" exclaimed Miss Em indignantly. "You grind me down so that I never have enough. What's fifty pounds a year? It's not as if you hadn't the money either. I'm sure I don't know what you're saving for! Come now, dad," she added coaxingly, "let me have twenty pounds to pay off these little bills and I promise I'll keep strictly within my allowance this next year."

"No, Em, no," said the old man, glancing apprehensively at the door. "Twenty pounds! Why, it's a small fortune! One or two I might have managed, though even that wouldn't be easy, but twenty—impossible, my dear. Impossible!"

"You'll drive me to do something desperate with your meanness!" exclaimed his daughter passionately. "Good Lord! to think of the master of Carrig-duve haggling over a paltry twenty pounds! And to his own daughter too! 'Tis enough to make the very stones cry out on you."

The old man took no notice of this outburst. Domestic tyranny had cowed his spirit completely. He always expected his women-folk to storm and rave, and experience had taught him that the louder the storm, the quicker it was exhausted.

Miss Em finished her breakfast and returned to the charge.

"I'm going to Dublin next week," she said, "to Lady Patricia Moira. There's to be a big ball, and I must look presentable. I can put up with a second-rate gown, but I must have my mother's jewels. You will get them for me, governor, won't you?"

"I—I haven't them, Em. I mean they're in your stepmother's charge," stammered the old man, with a conscience-stricken look at the pale and indignant face that flashed astonished wrath at him. "She—well, she took the case from me one day as I was looking over it, and——"

"And of course you've never seen it since," cried Miss Em in a tone of suppressed fury. "But they're *mine*, you know my mother always said I was to have them!"

"Yes, yes," said the old man feebly. "But legally, my dear, legally, they're not yours at all. Most of them are family jewels and go to the mistress of Carrig-duve. I gave them to your mother, but if I had had a son——"

Miss Em's eyes flashed ominously. "They were *mine*," she reiterated in a low stern voice. "I had more right to them than a stranger whom you chose to place at the head of your table, and who has dragged you down to penury and shame, and made your very name a laughing-stock in your own birth-place! Have them I will," she continued, rising from the table, determination printed in every line of her face.

"You must get them for yourself, then," said her father despairingly. "I can't help you. 'Tis a thousand pities, Em, you won't try and get on with your stepmother. It would be so much better and pleasanter for us all!"

"I *hate* her, and I've told you so a hundred times!" cried Miss Em, the hot Irish blood boiling in her veins, the fiery Irish temper flashing

from her eyes. "You brought her here, you put her over me—you spoilt my whole life and made my home a hell! And now, because you're too cowardly to stand up for your own rights, or care what she does, you expect *me* to bow down to her also. Never! I'd die sooner!"

"Em, Em!" entreated the old man piteously; "don't say such things; remember your own faults; remember the ruin from which I have saved you! It was as much for your own sake as mine I gave another mistress to Carrig-duve. I saw you were too young, too wilful, too reckless to rule here. Weren't you ready even to make shipwreck of your own life?"

"Hush!" said Miss Em, her face turning very white; "I thought we had agreed to bury *that* folly for ever. Am I the only one in the family who has made mistakes, or committed follies? I think the O'Haras could show a pretty record of misdeeds, and worse, if we looked back for a few generations. Once for all, father——"

But the abrupt opening of the door and the appearance of Mrs. O'Hara with the housekeeping keys jingling in her hand cut short any further remark, and to avoid discussion Miss Em gathered up her letters and quickly left the room.

* * * * *

Once behind her own locked door and safe from observation Miss Em tossed the letters and accounts on to the dressing-table and sat herself down to reflect on the situation.

Money she must have, and there seemed little chance of wringing it from out of her father's petticoat-guarded hoard. She knew well enough how every penny was doled out, and accounted for with the utmost strictness; how not a cheque was signed, nor a shilling advanced without her stepmother's cognizance. Mrs. O'Hara even objected to her paltry allowance, insufficient as it was, and would have curtailed it, if possible.

"I'm afraid an old dress will have to do," reflected Miss Em ruefully. "But the diamonds I *will* have, 'tis a little too much her getting hold of them. I wonder where she keeps them. Perhaps Quinlan knows; I'll ask her when she comes up to do my room. If I could only hear from Lady Pat! I wish now I'd asked her to telegraph. 'Tis a whole day wasted."

A step in the corridor arrested her attention. She opened her door and saw the old servant, duster and broom in hand, approaching.

"Come in, Quinlan, a moment," said Miss Em eagerly; "I want you."

She closed the door again, and turned the key against possible intrusion.

"You can pretend you did my room first," she said hurriedly. "There, begin sweeping, for goodness' sake, and listen to me. Come over this side."

She hurried the old woman across to the other end of the room, regardless of her bewilderment.

"Now tell me," she said imperatively; "do you remember the black leather box that had my mother's diamonds in it? Nod, you needn't speak. I daresay she's listening about somewhere. You do? Well, where is it now?"

"Locked in the old bureau, darlint, in the mistress's bedroom," whispered the old nurse obediently.

Miss Em looked disconcerted.

"Botheration! Is it there she keeps it? How on earth am I to get hold of them?"

"Is it the jules you're wanting, Miss Peg dear?" asked Quinlan eagerly. "Shure, but they're your own. You've only to ask for them!"

"Ask for them! Ask *her*!" exclaimed Miss Em contemptuously "Not I, indeed! She's no right to have them, and I mean her to know that before long. Quinny dear," she added coaxingly, "you'll help me, won't you? I'm going to a grand ball in Dublin, and I must have the diamonds to wear at it."

"Of course, darlint. Who's the right but yourself to do that same! Help ye? Shure and I will with all my heart. What's it ye'd be wanting me to do now?"

"To get me her keys any day before next Tuesday, and keep her out of the way for ten minutes, that's all, Quinny. I'd rather leave it as late as possible," she added thoughtfully. "Less chance of her missing them. Say Monday, any time. Can you do it?"

"'Twon't be aisy, dear, but I'll try my best. You know how close she is with everything, and kays in particular. Besides, you'd want the two bunches, wouldn't you?—the bureau and the jule case? Ye're not going to take them all?"

"Every one, if I get the chance," said Miss Em savagely. "What right has she, an interloper, a nobody, to the O'Hara jewels? She's mean enough to sell them, or——" she stopped abruptly, her eyes flashed, a sudden ripple of mirth spread over her whole face making it look almost youthful, "I wonder I never thought of *that* before! There's one way out of my difficulties at all events. Hush, Quinny, I hear her coming. Sweep, sweep, like the devil, can't you! Here, give me the broom and stand aside."

She seized it from the bewildered old woman's hands and commenced so vigorous a use of it that the noise made the knock at the door almost inaudible. It was repeated more loudly, "Quinlan!" came in sharp, peremptory tones; "what are you doing there? You swept out Miss Emilia's room yesterday; it doesn't require to be done again."

"Yes, it does," answered her step-daughter from within. "The carpet's as dingy as an old horse-cloth, and I'm trying to see the pattern again. I've locked Quinlan in, so it's no use your calling her. She can't get out till I choose to let her."

There was a muttered exclamation, and the sound of retreating steps.

"Shure, Miss Peg darlint, you do make her mad!" said Quinlan almost reproachfully. "And there's a hape of things waitin' to be done downstairs."

"Let her do them herself then, if she won't keep enough servants," answered Miss Em scornfully. "'Tis shameful to make an old woman like you work so hard. I wonder you do it, Quinny, I wouldn't."

"Ah, Miss Peg dear, when you come to my time of life 'tisn't much of the spirit of rebellion that's left in you. For the sake of pace and for the sake of the family I'd work till the hands dropped off me."

"I believe you would!" said Miss Em, throwing down the broom, and with a sudden impulse of tenderness putting her arms round the old woman's neck. "Quinny, if ever I marry a rich man I'll take you away from here, and you shall live with me and never do another stroke of work except to help me ordering the dinners and superintending the servants. You shall have your own room, and a black silk gown to wear, and we'll be as happy as the days are long!"

"Faith, honey, and 'tis you have the generous heart, I know," said the old woman, wiping a tear from her eye. "And never, never a one in the whole of Oireland wishes you better luck than meself. But, darlint, you've

been a long time picking and choosing, if I may make so bold as to spake of it, and there's but few good matches to be made nowadays. Shure the ould country isn't what it was at all, at all!"

"Quinny," said Miss Em suddenly, as she laid both hands on the old woman's shoulders, and looked gravely and almost sternly at the worn, wrinkled face, "I've made up my mind to marry some one, *any one*, if it is only for a home and peace. I'm sick of this wandering life, sick of scheming and plotting, and shifts and debts. God! how tired I feel of it all!"

Her hands dropped. The light died out of her face. She walked across the room, and stood at the window looking out at the desolate garden and the leafless trees through which the pale wintry sunlight gleamed.

"The spring will dawn again for them," she said in her heart; "but never for me, never again for me!"

CHAPTER IV

"WHEN IN DOUBT . . ."

"BLESSED are they who expect nothing:' how much disappointment they escape!"

Miss Em thought this if she did not express it when Thursday failed to bring her the expected letter from Lady Patricia. She had made a supreme effort to be punctual at breakfast, but the effort was destined to be unrewarded. Her disappointment was so keen that Mrs. O'Hara noticed it, and wondered what was the cause. The usual battle of words between herself and her step-daughter was for once foregone, despite repeated challenges on her own part. Miss Em seemed absorbed in thought and utterly indifferent to her surroundings.

"What shall I do if she fails me?" she said to herself again and again. "And yet why should she? We've always been good friends, and I've done nothing to offend her."

She retired to her own room and stood looking out of the window in a disconsolate manner. The whole long day to get through and nothing to look forward to at the end of it!

Her spirits fell to zero; she could have cried with vexation, but she felt that would be only capping one folly with another. As a last resource she determined to spend the time in looking over her wardrobe. All hopes of a new gown had faded. The peach silk must be left for some more fortunate rival; still, she had other dresses, and was skilful enough in the art of alteration to make even an old one present a totally new aspect.

With a desperate courage she plunged into the recesses of boxes and cupboards, producing therefrom many strange and antiquated garments. In most of them the richness of material was rendered almost valueless by its extreme scantiness, a fact of which Miss Em was fully aware. "Why, 'twould take three of these to make one gown now," she murmured disconsolately, as she turned over brocades, and *moirés*, and poplins, all useless garments according to fashion; yet with a quaint, old-world grace about the stiff whale-boned bodices, the blonde lace, and crushed artificial flowers.

Most of them had belonged to her mother, a few were relics of her own girlhood, and her hand lingered lovingly over one or two, eloquent of a bygone time, sacred to memories of what "might have been."

At last she pushed them all away in a heap on the bed. Not one of them would do. "When in doubt, wear black!" she cried suddenly. "I wonder I never thought of that now! There's that satin, 'twould be just the thing. I must sacrifice the body, which is a pity, but 'twill easily cut low. If only I had some good lace. There ought to be some old Limerick somewhere; but I suppose Madame Skinflint has it, and I wouldn't demean myself to ask for the loan of it."

She looked approvingly at the soft rich satin, a little worn and shabby by daylight, but sure to be "equal to the occasion," when a few magic touches had renovated the weak places and made the best of the strong. "Shall I cut up the bodice now, or wait till to-morrow?" reflected Miss Em, as she surveyed it, scissors in hand. "I might hear from Lady Pat next post, unless she's ill. Gracious, I hope she's not! I'll go round and see Mrs. MacShamus this afternoon. Maybe she'll have heard something, but I mustn't show I'm anxious. I wonder if the Castle Lustrell people are going? That's to say, Molly and that old harridan, Miss Lustrell. No fear of Sir Jasper stirring out of his shell. That old maid watches him like a cat. I believe she's afraid he'll marry again. I wonder if it's in his head at all. I declare I wouldn't mind taking him myself if I thought he'd die in a twelvemonth!"

A smile hovered over her lips as if the idea were infinitely amusing. She began to fold up the dresses and replace them in their various receptacles. But however long she lingered over the occupation the time passed very slowly. There was no use in going out before luncheon and—

Her thoughts were cut short by a tap at the door. She opened it, expecting to see her stepmother, but found herself confronted by the red-faced, red-armed abigail who was Quinlan's "under help," and did all the rough work of the establishment.

"Somethin' for you, miss," she said with a broad grin, and holding out a yellow paper with the corner of her coarse apron. "The bhoy came up to the front door as I was washing down the steps, so I brought it up straight. He's after asking sixpence for his trouble."

"Here, give him this," cried Miss Em, thrusting some loose coppers into the girl's wet palm, and closing the door again she hastily tore open the envelope and glanced at the message. Then her whole face grew radiant.

"Hurrah! I thought she wouldn't fail me, bless her, dear old soul!"

Your letter just forwarded. Am staying at the Gresham. Delighted to have you. Will engage room for Tuesday. Am writing. MOIRA.

She read this aloud from sheer inability to keep it to herself, and literally danced to and fro, waving it above her head. Then suddenly she thrust the paper into her pocket and seizing a pair of scissors commenced a ruthless cutting and unripping of the black satin bodice which was destined to transform it into an evening one.

* * * * *

Time passed swiftly enough now while Miss Em's busy fingers were at work, and her thoughts, to judge from her face, were of a pleasanter nature than they had been an hour before.

The luncheon bell had just rung when she heard the sound of wheels in the avenue, followed by a loud ring at the front door. She started to her feet. "Good gracious! I hope it's not visitors, such a sight as I am too!"

A hurried survey of her appearance in the glass only confirmed that

fact. An old shabby morning-gown and dishevelled hair are not calculated to enhance the post-meridian charms of any woman.

"Whoever it is I can't see them, Quinlan," cried Miss Em protestingly, as the door opened to admit the old woman.

"Wisha, don't be after throubling yourself, 'tis only a bit of a letter the doctor left for you," said Quinlan, handing her the missive; "and I was to tell you luncheon was on the table, and they're waiting; shure 'tis a grand name to be giving to purtaties, and bread and cheese and scraps."

"Oh, for a good pint of champagne, Quinny!" cried Miss Em, with a little gasp. "I'm just dying for it, and I know there's lots in the cellar; only I suppose Mrs. O'Hara would sooner let it burst its own bottles than give any one a drop."

She had opened her letter while speaking, and glanced rapidly over a page of Mrs. MacShamus's stiff, prim writing.

"DEAR MISS EM,—The two Barrington girls have come over; Minnie was nearly dead with the toothache and the doctor had to extract the cause of suffering. Charley Warren, their cousin, a nice young fellow, came with them, and they're staying till about eight or nine to-night. So, my dear, will you drop into a high tea about six o'clock? I promise some of your favourite cakes. I've a lot of news for you.

"Yours most affectionately,

"THERESA MACSHAMUS."

"P.S.—Come as early as you wish."

"Gracious, Quinny!" cried Miss Em; "it never rains but it pours. 'Tis an invitation from Mrs. MacShamus for to-night; so if the luncheon's bad," she added laughingly, as she turned to leave the room, "I'll have one good meal to-day."

With her hand on the door she paused and looked back at the old woman. Then suddenly approached and whispered warningly: "*Don't forget the keys.*"

A sly look came into Quinlan's eyes. "Trust me, my dear!" she said with answering caution. "And now hurry down or they'll be wondering what we're about."

Miss Em ran down the stairs as lightly as a girl. She was in wild spirits once more. The sort of mood that meant mischievous possibilities, and gave a tinge of excitement even to an existence utterly antagonistic.

Her stepmother could not understand the change, or read any satisfactory meaning for it in Mrs. MacShamus's note which Miss Em tendered as explanation. She had determined not to explode the Dublin mystery until she had received Lady Pat's letter.

"I'm sure there's nothing to get excited about in being asked to a tea-party," said Mrs. O'Hara sourly. "And those Barrington girls are the most stuck-up and conceited creatures one could wish to meet. They may have birth, but I don't know where the breeding comes in."

"I've heard them make the same remark about—you," said Miss Em, helping herself to potatoes. "Isn't there any beer?" she asked, glancing discontentedly at the glass jug of water by her side.

"We're just out of it," snapped Mrs. O'Hara, ignoring the first part of the speech.

"It's very odd, but you're always 'just out' of everything decent in the eating and drinking line when I chance to come home," said Miss Em. "Things were very different under *my* management. Carrig-duve did not boast then of empty larder and cellars."

"Probably not," retorted Mrs. O'Hara; "but it boasted of stacks of unpaid bills, and was a by-word for waste and extravagance."

"You can hardly be expected to judge of Irish hospitality," observed Miss Em coolly. "I've always noticed that the middle-class society of England are very mean. It is their notion of economy."

"If the middle class or any class in Ireland had a little of the English thrift and prudence, the country wouldn't be in its present disgraceful state."

"We'd be well enough if your country wouldn't meddle with us," answered Miss Em sharply. She was always patriotic in any controversy of this nature. "You can't understand us either as a nation or as individuals. The whole country's gone to wreck and ruin since ever it gave in to the Saxon rule."

"I should think the 'Saxon rule,' as you call it, had a sorry bargain," sneered Mrs. O'Hara. "A nation of beggars who are too proud to work, and seem only bent on their own destruction! Who don't even show common gratitude for what's done for them, and are as cowardly as they're impecunious!"

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Miss Em contemptuously. "To judge of a people you must study race, language, traditions, and laws. An Englishman's ideas of Ireland are as narrow and bigoted as his own social prejudices. Pride of birth and nobility of origin are as nothing to him in comparison with a banking account at Coutts's or a 'business in the city.' But neither gold nor broadcloth will ever master us, or make us plead what you term 'inferiority.'"

"Oh, I know it's waste of breath to argue with an Irish person," said Mrs. O'Hara loftily. "You're all as obstinate as your favourite pigs and as unreasonable as children. It would be a good day for England if she could wash her hands of you entirely, only you're so untrustworthy that you can't be left alone!"

She rose abruptly, as if to end the discussion. Miss Em turned to her father, who had been a silent listener.

"I wonder," she said wrathfully, "that the O'Haras don't turn in their graves! To think that the last of their name should sit there silent, letting himself be insulted at his own table by an English alien!"

"My dear Emilia," said the old man meekly, "let us hope the O'Haras are better employed than in paying the least attention to an illogical discussion, the like of which they have shared in a hundred times with a similar result—loss of temper and waste of breath. When the lion lies down with the lamb, then may England and Ireland agree over a system of government, or clasp hands in mutual deference to each other's opinion."

CHAPTER V

THE BARRINGTON GIRLS

"I'm not going to let myself down before those Barrington girls," said Miss Em to herself as she began her afternoon toilet. "I've not aired that Bond Street costume here yet; one walk down the avenue is enough to destroy the tail of any gown unless it was lined with leather, but I'll really venture it to-day. It'll go hard with them to beat *that*, though they do get their dresses from London."

She was not far wrong; for the dark tweed skirt and coat headed by

a plain black hat with one good ostrich feather curling round the brim, made her look stylish enough to face more formidable rivals than Mrs. MacShamus's nieces.

"It's too early to show myself yet; where can I go in the meantime?" thought Miss Em, as she was drawing on her gloves and surveying her appearance with intense satisfaction as reflected by the glass. "Oh! I know; I'll go and see old Biddy Lynch in the village and take her some tea. Poor old soul! I haven't been there since I came home at Christmas. I wonder if I could spare her some money."

She looked over her store of loose silver and selected two half-crowns from amongst it, which she wrapped in paper and put into her pocket. Then, with one more glance at herself, she took up a neat umbrella, a Christmas present from Lady Pat, and sailed majestically down the stairs. She paused a moment at the dining-room door to look in and inform her stepmother she "wouldn't be late," which information was received with a grunt. But Mrs. O'Hara's eyes had taken in every detail of her appearance, and it formed a fine text for extravagance when she was left alone with her husband.

The delivery of the tea and the inevitable gossip with old Biddy, who had been a servant at Carrig-duve in the time of the first Mrs. O'Hara, brought it close to five o'clock when Miss Em entered the doctor's house.

The hall was lighted, and a warm glow of fire and lamps streamed from the open door of the dining-room. A savoury odour of cakes, hot bread, and other good things signified that preparations for tea were already under weigh.

Mrs. MacShamus came out into the hall when she heard Miss Em's voice, a shawl trailing behind her as it had slipped from her shoulders, her ordinarily placid face flushed and worried-looking.

"Oh, my dear, I'm so glad to see you!" she exclaimed in a nervous whisper almost bordering on tearfulness. "I'm tired to death of them," with a glance at the closed drawing-room door; "they're worse than ever. I don't know what to do to amuse them. 'Tis nothing but 'yes' and 'no,' and spiteful hints at everybody; and the doctor took their cousin off with him, so it's been all on my shoulders."

"You poor old dear!" cried Miss Em, kissing her affectionately; "what a time you must have had! Well, I'll take them off your hands now, though, faith, I feel more like shocking them than entertaining them, and that's the truth."

"Will you take off your hat?" asked Mrs. MacShamus. "Why, dear me, how very smart you are to-day!"

"And why wouldn't I be coming to meet the grand Miss Barringtons?"

"They're only in their old purple merinoes," said Mrs. MacShamus, with an admiring survey of the stylish tweed costume and becoming hat. "My dear, you look twenty years younger than they do, and with fifty times the style about you."

Miss Em laughed softly. "Then I'll go in and face them on the strength of that pretty speech," she said. "If you've anything else to do, Mrs. MacShamus, don't be standing on ceremony. I'll entertain them, I promise you."

She walked straight into the drawing-room without further prelude. It was occupied by two girls, sisters evidently from the likeness, which was further emphasised by their always dressing alike.

The eldest, Minnie, was reclining on an arm-chair by the fire, with her head propped by cushions. The youngest, Laura, sat a little distance off, prim, precise, and dignified. Miss Em took in the scene with one rapid glance, and placed her lance in rest.

"How d'ye do, Miss Barrington? How are you, Miss Laura? Sorry to hear about the toothache, so unbecoming, and then to lose it. Not a front one, I hope?"

Miss Barrington lifted her head and extended a languid hand in greeting.

"No; I was spared that misfortune. Dear me, what an age it is since we met, Miss O'Hara! You've been away, I hear; visiting as usual, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Miss Em; "I've been in London and in Yorkshire both," and she seated herself where the light would do justice to her figure and costume.

"Do you propose making a long stay here?" asked the other sister.

"No," said Miss Em shortly. "I'm going to Dublin next week."

"To Dublin!" The sisters exchanged glances. Despite their advantages of race and blood, the Barringtons were as impecunious as most old Irish families, and a season in the brilliant little capital was a rare event for them.

"Yes, Lady Patricia Moira has invited me again. She's my godmother, you know, and having no children of her own——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Miss Barrington. "She's very eccentric, isn't she? Likes to have all sorts of odd people about her, actresses and singers and writers? At least I've heard so."

"She likes to associate with clever and amusing people," said Miss Em, "if that's being eccentric. Her own birth and position are too irreproachable for the scruples of less fortunate people to affect her choice of society."

Miss Em's spirits were rising. Female antagonists were not new to her, and she dearly loved what she termed "a brush with the tongue."

"People differ so much as to their views of society," answered the fair Minnie languidly. "There are those Kellys now, of whom every one's talking. Goodness knows how old Kelly has made his money; but I hear no one in Dublin can entertain as they do, and that they've got the Lord Lieutenant to go to their ball next week. I suppose you'll be there, Miss O'Hara?"

"Certainly," said Miss Em mendaciously; "I'm going with Lady Pat's party. 'Tis to be a most brilliant affair; all the flowers are coming from Covent Garden; and as for the supper, not the Viceregal Lodge itself has ever given such an order!"

Miss Barrington fidgeted among her cushions. News like this was gall and wormwood to her. She was getting on in years, and her good looks would soon be as traditional as other records of the Barrington family. What was the use of being "well brought up" and accomplished and of unexceptional lineage if one was condemned to stagnate in a remote Irish county, seeing the same people and doing the same things from year's end to year's end? And there was Miss Em, a good fifteen or sixteen years older than herself, getting twice as much fun and amusement out of life. It was enough to sour the sweetest temper to think how badly Fate arranged things sometimes!

"How well she's dressed, and how well she wears!" so ran her thoughts as she glanced from under lowered eyelids at the beautifully cut

gown, and animated face which the becoming glow of firelight and lamp-light revealed at their best. Miss Barrington was aggravatingly conscious that she herself was very far from being at "her best" this special afternoon. Toothache and an unbecoming gown were disadvantages against which even forty years of age in a Bond Street costume might hold their own triumphantly, and proud Miss Barrington's wrath grew apace at the entrance of the doctor. Paddy Kearney and her own good-looking young cousin drew forth all Miss Em's weapons of subjugation, and left herself and her sister quite "out in the cold."

Certainly Miss Em was at her best to-day. The reaction from disappointment to certainty had sent her mercurial spirits up to fever point. Besides, the consciousness of being well dressed is an eminent source of satisfaction to a woman, and will give her more confidence than the possession of all the virtues.

Tea was at last announced as ready by the neat parlour-maid, and the party filed in to the cosy dining-room with a sense of good things coming that was speedily verified by the delicacies provided. The Miss Barringtons' languid airs and perpetual sneers were not provocative of admiration, and even their tolerant cousin showed an open preference for Miss Em's gay sallies and unfailing good humour.

Irish conversation has always a strong "personal" tendency, and deals chiefly with human interests and affairs. It is essentially of the world and the society in which the speakers move and live. Gossip maintains its own in all circles alike, and there is deeper interest manifested in what is "said and done" than in what is thought or written.

No one who has lived long among Irish people can fail to note the strong element of curiosity that pervades their conversation, and seems the motive power of any intimacy. Deeds and events may be agitating the rest of the world, but the fact of Mrs. MacCarthy's twins, the rumour of Lord So-and-so's wife's elopement, or some solecism in dress or manners perpetrated by a near neighbour, will interest a circle of Irish folk far more than the changes of politics, or triumphs of literature and art.

Miss Em always took care to be well grounded in the subjects of the day, even if she did not care about them; but she took equal care to suit her conversation to her surroundings, and Mrs. MacShamus and even the worthy doctor dearly loved a gossip.

"I was almost forgetting my grand bit of news!" exclaimed the old lady as she handed Miss Em a second cup of tea. "Who do you think is going to Dublin to-morrow for the season?"

"You may just as well say it first as last, Theresa," said the doctor. "Miss Em's not likely to guess in a hurry."

"The Lustrells, every one of them! Think of that, my dear!" cried Mrs. MacShamus triumphantly.

"What, Sir Jasper too!" exclaimed Miss Em.

"Indeed, yes. Ask Paddy there if he isn't. 'Twas he told us. Perhaps 'tis on his daughter's account. They'll be wanting her to make a good match, seeing she's an only child."

"Is she really so pretty? I've hardly seen her," murmured Miss Barrington languidly, as she accepted a soda scone from the plate Captain Kearney offered.

"Pretty? She's perfectly lovely!" cried Miss Em enthusiastically. "And so accomplished too! Why, she's been finished in Paris. She'll

make a sensation when she comes out, I'll warrant. I wonder," she added suddenly, "are *they* going to the Kellys' ball?"

She glanced at Captain Kearney, sitting calm and apparently unconcerned opposite to her.

"That's more than I can say," he answered, meeting her eye. "My uncle is not a very communicative person."

"'Tis a long time since I've seen him," said Miss Em thoughtfully.

"You must look out that he doesn't pick up a wife in Dublin, Paddy," said the doctor. "That would be putting your nose out of joint for you."

"There's no fear of that, he's too much of a woman-hater," said the captain indifferently; "and much too old," he added.

"Old, is it?" laughed the doctor. "Sir Jasper's a good sound score of years before him, I can tell you. Those thin, wiry, bloodless-looking men would wear out two of such rollicking devils as you and your friend, Charley Raikes."

"Is Major Raikes here?" exclaimed Miss Barrington, with the first symptom of animation she had shown.

"He is," said Paddy Kearney. "He was staying with the Johnsons for a fortnight, but his leave is up the same time as my own. We're both going back to Dublin early next week. Miss Em," and he turned pointedly to her, "you mustn't forget your promise. I'll secure a carriage, and you and I and Raikes will travel together. You go by the express, I suppose?"

"Indeed, yes, if that's your train," said Miss Em joyfully.

"And mind," he continued, "that you're booked to me for the first waltz, so be punctual."

"Gracious!" thought Miss Em, "engaging myself for a dance at a ball where I'm not even invited. *Mais l'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace*. Nothing venture, nothing win."

Aloud she answered: "Paddy, you ought to know that whatever else I may be late for, I never miss a dance; but, my gallant captain, you take care that you're up to time, or a forfeit of half a dozen pairs of gloves—Supple's, mind, I never wear any others—six and a half and four buttons."

"I'll be there to the moment if I'm alive," he replied solemnly, and producing a note-book he proceeded to make an entry.

"Paddy," she said reproachfully, "couldn't you remember an appointment with me without making a note of it?"

"It's not the appointment," he answered emphatically, "but I know you're particular about the fit of your gloves."

"That sounds rather as if you were preparing to pay the forfeit," interrupted the eldest Miss Barrington, with an affected laugh. The interchange of badinage had tried her temper considerably. "I suppose she's conceited enough to swallow all that," she added in a lower key to her cousin. "At her age to be flirting and dancing, and going on like a school-girl! Disgusting, I call it!"

"Miss Barrington," rang out Miss Em's clear tones at this moment, "what has become of that curate who was here last Christmas time? You know who I mean, Reverend George—George—Oh! I can't remember his name—but he wore a Noah's-ark coat and talked with a whine, and always held his hands so."

She exemplified the action of finger-tip to finger-tip, and sanctimonious

expression with such admirable mimicry that every one laughed. Every one with the exception of Miss Barrington, whose tendencies were strongly ritualistic, and in whose face amazement and wrath were struggling for adequate expression.

"I consider it very improper to jest on sacred subjects," she said at last, when the laughter had subsided.

"Is the Reverend George a sacred subject?" asked Miss Em innocently. "I'm sure if he is, I beg your pardon. Have they made a dean or a bishop of him? His talents were quite thrown away here."

"You're certainly right there," answered the fair Minnie savagely. "No one was capable of understanding him, and all his efforts at improving our services and elevating the general tone of worship at St. Michael's were quite wasted on an unappreciative congregation."

"Dear me, how very sad!" murmured Miss Em sympathisingly. "But *you* always went to week-day services, Miss Barrington, and I remember how generous you were about flowers for the decorations. Do you still dress the church for festivals?"

Miss Barrington's face grew crimson. It was humiliating to confess that with the departure of the Reverend George Crozier her enthusiasm had faded, and her attendance at week-day services become somewhat irregular. She cast about in her mind for something with which to retort upon her foe, but she could think of nothing till her sister came to her aid with the remark—

"We all thought it was quite a case between you and him, Miss O'Hara. He left soon after you did and went to London. Why, we were all looking out for wedding-cards!"

Miss Em laughed with unabated good-humour. Speeches like this only amused her. Feminine spite was so evident, and so wasted on one who had learned from life at least one grand lesson—never to show the wound, however true the shot.

"Wedding-cards, is it?" here interposed the doctor. "I'll go bail that when Miss Em does change her name it will be for a better one than that of a weedy parson."

"If you allude to Mr. Crozier, uncle," answered Miss Barrington with stately dignity, "I beg to inform you that he was of unexceptionable lineage."

"Maybe that's true enough; but you wouldn't be expecting a fine woman like Miss Em to fall in love with him. She's mighty hard to please, I can tell you. Eh, Miss Em?"

"Faith, she melted the hearts of the swains in them parts," quoted Paddy Kearney.

Miss Em looked significantly at Mrs. MacShamus, as a hint to leave the table. She did not relish personal allusions.

"How time flies!" she murmured, as a general move followed the signal for drawing-room adjournment. Her glance rested dreamily on Miss Barrington's sharp features as if to emphasise her words. "Love, beauty, youth, how soon they go!"

"We must be going now, auntie dear," said Laura Barrington, turning to the old lady. "You know we've a long drive before us."

"Couldn't you stay for a game at cards?" asked her aunt. "'Twill be no darker at nine o'clock than it is now, and we're just a nice party for a round game."

"Oh no, I couldn't think of it," interposed Minnie. "You're such terrible gamblers here," she added with an affected laugh; "and we never go beyond penny points, you know."

"Well, it shall be penny points if you'll stay," chimed in the doctor. "I'm agreeable to anything."

But Miss Barrington was inexorable; Miss Em's well-known predilection for cards prompted her to fulfil the agreeable duty of disappointing any expectation of a game *that evening*.

She drew her sister's arm within her own as they all stood at the foot of the stairs and marched her off to put on hats and wraps. The movement was decided. Mrs. MacShamus followed them meekly; and the handsome cousin, proclaiming loudly his disappointment at being dragged off *sans cérémonie*, lingered devotedly round Miss Em and wished his autocratic relatives at Jericho.

"You'll stay for a rubber, at all events?" said the doctor, patting her arm as he held out a cigar-case to the young men. "I promised for you to Paddy when I met him. We'll send you home all right, for I've to pay a last visit to a patient in the village who's down with fever."

"I'll be delighted," she said readily, her eyes sparkling with prospective enjoyment, adding, in a stage whisper, "Not *penny points* I hope, doctor?"

"Faith no," he said, laughing. "Milk for babes is all very well, but we like stronger diet, eh, Miss Em?"

She made no answer. She was gazing out through the now opened hall door into the chill winter night.

The light flickered on the waiting "jingle" and its shabby driver. The shrubs that bordered the drive loomed black and shadowy in the gloom.

Miss Em suddenly shivered and drew back.

"I feel as if some one was walking over my grave," she said, and turned away from the cold pulseless night into the warmth and comfort of the house.

CHAPTER VI

"WHEN SHADOWS SEEMED OMENS"

It almost seemed as if with the exodus of the Barringtons and their escort Miss Em's high spirits had also departed. She scarcely noticed the doctor's sallies, and even once forgot to return her partner's lead, a solecism almost unprecedented in her career as a whist player.

"Are you thinking of your ball-dress, Miss Em?" asked Dr. MacShamus, glancing with some wonder at her grave face. "Don't we all know you'll look beautiful whatever you wear?"

"You'll be having a new dress, of course, my dear?" interpolated Mrs. MacShamus, rousing up with inherent feminine interest at the mention of millinery.

"No," said Miss Em curtly; "I shall wear black satin and diamonds."

"Ah, your poor mother's jewels; and beautiful they are, fit for the queen herself," said the old lady. "I wish I could be there to see you."

"And so your uncle and cousin are really going to Dublin, Paddy?" said Miss Em, rousing herself with an effort. "I hope we shall meet."

"Sure to," said Captain Kearney. "They're putting up at the Grasham at first. I don't know whether they mean to take a house later

on. I'm inclined to think it's a dodge of Aunt Sabina's; it will save the trouble and expense of entertaining."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. MacShamus; "the castle's very different since she became mistress. It's to be hoped she won't influence Sir Jasper and make him like herself. I pity that poor girl with all my heart—your trick again, Miss Em, dear—what luck you have!"

"'Lucky at cards, unlucky in love,' you know the proverb," said the doctor, surveying his own hand with marked discontent.

"What makes you talk so much about love, this evening?" asked Miss Em, with a flash of the dark grey eyes that were still her strong point. "I thought you didn't believe in it. Haven't I heard you say it's a species of cerebral affection, and should be treated as a brain fever, or any other physical ailment?"

"Allowed to run its course, eh? and then taken in hand. Not a bad method, doctor," laughed the young captain.

"It's a decree of nature," said Dr. MacShamus authoritatively, "that makes a man love all women, and *vice versa*. The choice of one in particular is but an accident, for which circumstances, or opportunity, are responsible."

"You don't believe in the 'affinity' of natures or hearts then?"

"Divil a bit! I've seen too much of life and marriage for that. Doctors and lawyers get behind the scenes, you know; the world at large only sees the way they're set, and the effect of the limelight. On the whole I'm sorrier for women than for men. They fall in love with the ideal, but they've to marry the *man*, and it's a poor bargain they get with even the best of us. Marriage doesn't enchant for long, though love may."

"I'm sure, Jerry, *we've* been very happy and comfortable," said his wife plaintively. "A great deal depends on women themselves. I've known quite as many bad wives as bad husbands."

"And don't you think that men have illusions and ideals too?" asked Paddy Kearney, scoring the odd trick, and marking the game to himself and partner.

"Oh! we all set out in life with a great deal of useless baggage," answered the doctor. "When the miles and the pace begin to tell, we drop it by degrees. 'Tis hard to part with some of it, but the loss brings so much comfort that at last we wonder why we ever took up such a burden."

"The longer one lives," said Miss Em with some bitterness, "the more one wonders at the uselessness of life; what does it amount to at best? A little pleasure, a great deal of suffering, schemes, hopes, ambitions, disillusion; then, the same end for all, and beyond that who can say? If only there were no 'afterwards' one might get some enjoyment out of existence; as it is——"

She shrugged her shoulders, and began to deal with rapid dexterous fingers.

The doctor looked at her critically. He scarcely knew what to make of her in this mood.

"Indeed, you're right about the 'afterwards,' Miss Em," said Paddy Kearney. "Why, there's not a single pleasure, feeling, passion, or pursuit that *that* little word doesn't spoil for us."

"'Tis only the natural reaction of the moral nature," said the doctor. "Not finding the satisfaction it sought or imagined, it rebels against temporary enslavement. We're all bent on fighting the 'angel' within us, because the devil offers us a more attractive bargain."

"Jerry, *my dear!*" appealed Mrs. MacShamus, in shocked accents.

He leant forward and patted the wrinkled old hand that lay on the card-table.

"Never mind, Theresa," he said; "the old gentleman never could have had anything to say to you, so you needn't be troubling your head about his bargains."

What was the expression in Miss Em's face as she looked at the placid brow, the soft white hair, the kindly eyes whose lustre though dimmed was yet replaced by a sweeter light than that of youth? Envy, regret, wonder? Something of all these. They could never be hers, she knew. Perhaps the spirit which had so bravely met or defied the storms of life was beginning to flag under repeated battles, and recognised at last that there might be something better in peace than strife, in content than turmoil, in the quiet stagnation of the haven rather than the restless sea beyond.

The depression of this mood lasted, despite her efforts to appear her usual rattling, brilliant self.

"I hope nothing is going to happen," she thought, as she left the doctor's house an hour later, under the joint escort of himself and Captain Kearney. "'Tis very odd I should feel as if something was hanging over me; misfortune or trouble. Yet, I can't see what I'm to fear now."

She made a vigorous endeavour to emulate her companions' gaiety, and succeeded well enough to deceive them. A woman might have detected a false ring in the laughter, an effort in the perpetual flow of badinage; but men are less keen of observation, and as a rule accept the opposite sex very much as they show themselves.

The straggling ill-lit village street was almost deserted. Above it the dark clouds lowered, heavy with rain and starless.

It was a poor unsavoury place at best,—ill-drained, ill-paved, an eloquent advertisement of the poverty, thriftlessness, and discontent which are so thoroughly characteristic of the Irish lower orders.

As far back as Miss Em could recollect it had presented the same aspect, and probably would continue to do so even when a new generation replaced the present. What is nobody's business in particular seldom makes any loud demand on popular attention.

"Who is your patient, doctor?" asked Miss Em as they passed the cabins and little hucksters' shops that made up the village.

"Old Pat Mahoney at the inn," he answered. "And here we're at it. Paddy will take care of you the rest of the way, Miss Em; and don't you be running off to Dublin without saying good-bye to us, or there'll be ructions."

"Oh, don't fear but I'll see you often enough between this and then," said Miss Em, in her clear ringing tones.

Her voice fell on the ear of a man who was just leaving the public-house. As if struck by something familiar in it, he stopped and looked eagerly at the little party. The light fell full on his face, and revealed him perfectly to all three. The doctor's eyes turned involuntarily to Miss Em. No mask could have looked more impassively unconscious than her face. Not so his own; astonishment plainly struggled with recognition, and he answered the stranger's nod with a half involuntary "Good-night."

Miss Em took Captain Kearney's arm and passed on.

"Who was that?" asked Paddy, when they were well out of earshot. "A stranger, I fancy. I don't remember seeing him before. He looked as if the world hadn't dealt over well with him."

"Did he?" said Miss Em indifferently. "I suppose he's come over to see some relations. He looked like a sailor."

Then she changed the subject abruptly, and the incident soon slipped from Paddy Kearney's memory.

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There was no need for the side entrance to-night, neither did the old house present such a gloomy appearance as on the last occasion. Miss Em found her father and his wife still sitting over the fire in the large and gloomy dining-room. The old man looked pinched and feeble; Mrs. O'Hara's shrivelled fingers were busy over a grey worsted stocking she was knitting.

Contrary to her usual habits, Miss Em lingered in the room until they both retired for the night, and even seemed to find something interesting in the locking of doors and cupboards, and the final extinguishing of lights. There was something strange and self-absorbed about her whole manner, but Mrs. O'Hara was not a keen observer, save in matters respecting domestic economy or servants' peculations, and made no comment on her step-daughter's unusual gravity.

An hour later, when the whole house was hushed and silent, Quinlan, who slept downstairs in a small room off the pantry, was aroused by a timid knock at her door. Then the handle was softly turned, and a white scared faced looked in.

"You're not in bed, Quinny? I thought so."

"Gracious, Miss Peg darlint, what's the matter?" asked the old woman. "You look as white as the driven snow! Och, alannah! is it a ghost you've seen? Why, you're shaking like the trembling grass!"

"Quinny?" gasped Miss Em hysterically; "have you heard—has any one told you that—that *he's* back?"

"*He*? Who are ye manin', darlint? 'Tis nothing I've heard this day, though Mary Buckley was up from the village; but shure, she kept her mouth as tight as an oyster. But meself knew something was goin' to happen, for we'd a bit of the cards to pass the time, and may I be a corpse this blessed night if the marriage card didn't turn up to you *three times*."

"Marriage!" Miss Em's face looked grey and hard in the dim candle-light. "No, no, Quinlan! I must not think of that. Ghost? Yes, you're right. It is a ghost I've seen; the ghost of my past youth, my past folly. There'll be no marriage lines for me, Quinny, but those its hand has penned."

There was something so sad and so desperate in her face that the old nurse looked at her in alarm.

"There, there, darlint, you're a bit upset," she said soothingly. "Just you sit down and wait a minute, I'll fetch you something that will do you good."

She drew Miss Em down on to the low truckle bed, and lit another candle with which she left the room. In a few moments she returned with a tray containing an old-fashioned goblet, a bottle half full of whisky, and another of water.

"There!" she exclaimed triumphantly, as she deposited them on the table and proceeded to mix a bumper, which she thrust into Miss Em's trembling hand; "drink that down now, ivery dhrop of it. 'Twill pull you together, and then you shall tell me what's after upsetting you. That's right—as good as champagne, eh, darlint?"

Miss Em gave her back the empty glass with a sigh of content. The colour had come back to her face and the light to her eyes. She drew the folds of her dressing-gown more closely round her and signed to the old woman to take a seat by her side.

"I feel worlds better, Quinny. But now, follow me. It is a fact what I said just now. I was coming home through the village with the doctor and Captain Kearney, and as we passed the public-house who should step out but—Denis Morrison!"

"Not old Morrison's son? Shure, darlint, 'tis dramin' ye ware!"

"No, Quinny, I wish to heaven I had been. *He has come back.* After all these years we stood face to face again."

"What did you do, Miss Peg?" asked the old nurse timidly.

"Nothing," she answered dreamily. "I don't suppose he knew me. How could he? There's not much likeness to the girl of twenty years ago in this face, Quinny."

She glanced at it in the old cracked mirror above the fireplace. Its response to that appeal was, to say the least, unflattering.

"Oh, why doesn't one's heart get old? why doesn't one forget?" she cried with sudden bitterness. "Look at my life, look at these years, look at *me!* and yet I've never forgotten; I've never cared for any man living since that time."

The old woman surveyed her compassionately as she sat huddled up on the bed, staring with unmeaning eyes at an unflattering vision. Hearing all the cold, unpalatable truths of middle-age in the echoes of "long ago." Surely a sorrier and more pathetic sight than the abandonment of youth, or the fiery grief whose violence is often exceeded by its brevity.

"Don't look like that, honey!" entreated Quinlan. "After all, even if he is here, you're not bound to meet. Bad cess to him for your evil ganius, say I! Shure he spoilt your whole life for you. 'Tis more than he's worth to be sending a sigh or a fret after him now."

"You are sure no one knows; no one except dad and Dr. MacShamus?" said Miss Em suddenly. "Mrs. O'Hara never got hold of it?"

"Sorra a word, my darlint. 'Twas managed beautiful. But for all that," added the old woman sorrowfully, "the master was bent on giving a new mistress to the house and rulin' you ever after."

"Nothing has been the same since," said Miss Em hopelessly.

"No, nor ever will be! Shure you've paid a heavy price for a girl's freak, honey!"

"You will try and find out why he's here, Quinny!" entreated her mistress; "there must be some reason."

"I did hear the ould gentleman was very ill; maybe he sent for him. 'Twould be strange now if he left him the money and property after all."

A hot flush dyed Miss Em's cheek and crept up to the shadows of her drooping braids of hair.

"He would scarcely do that," she said very low. "You know the reason."

"Ah, musha, there'd be ways and means of making *that* right," said Quinlan contemptuously. "'Tis aisy to square the law when you've got money. And that ould Morrison can lave his as he likes, law or no law. Who else has he belonging to him that he hasn't fought with or insulted years ago?"

Miss Em rose and wound up her loosely falling hair. "Four days more and then I'm safe," she muttered; "I needn't leave the house at all."

She moved away to the door and stood there a moment, her hand on the handle.

"What was that about the marriage card, Quinny?" she asked with a faint smile.

"Three times for you, honey, as sure as I'm a living woman, and riches next to it. Take my word but there's some grand lord in Dublin waitin' for ye, and ye're troubles are to end at last."

"With marriage?" said Miss Em bitterly. "More likely begin afresh, that's what my experience of life teaches."

CHAPTER VII

"LOOKING BACK"

A CLOCK in some distant region of the house was striking the hour of midnight as Miss Em entered her own room. She closed and locked the door and set down her candle. She felt too alert and wide awake for bed. All her thoughts were back in the past, and the spell of an invisible hand seemed forcing her to unlock at its will one secret chamber of memory that she had told herself should never again be opened.

To and fro she paced the floor, her hands clenched, her face set and stern. Was she to be drawn once more into the whirlpool of fate? Was the old sin, the old folly, destined to haunt her anew? The horizon of her life had often seemed bounded by sheer hopelessness; but again and again had vitality of temperament and a certain reckless courage which feared nothing, dispersed the black clouds, and through the rifted gloom shown streaks of brightness beyond.

But darkness was on her soul to-night, and her eyes grew sullen and unhopeful as they met their own reflection when some chance movement brought her face to face with it.

"How I loved him once, how I believed in him!" The sharp sting of wounded faith and broken trust sounded in the half-breathed words.

As if moved by some strong impulse she suddenly paused before a small chest, brass-bound and firmly secured, that stood in an obscure corner of the large room.

"My Bluebeard's cupboard!" and she laughed mockingly. "How often have I resolved to destroy your secrets, and yet there they are,—intact!"

She lifted the box and placed it on the table where her writing materials were lying. Then, unlocking it with a curious-looking key from her private bunch, she peered into its depths with a half-fearful curiosity.

"It is like opening a grave," she thought, as the faint odour of dead flowers and perfumed paper reached her. Her hand wandered among packets of letters, scraps of faded ribbon, dried and withered blossoms, once emblematic of hopes that like themselves were for ever dead.

Suddenly she touched a thick leather-covered pocket-book lying at the bottom of the box. Half reluctantly she drew it out.

The dust of withered flowers, and their faint *pot-pourri* scent, were like haunting memories as she opened and turned the fluttering leaves.

Gradually her face softened, her eyes grew misty and tender.

Strange it is that of all associations with the past, and with those we

have loved, or lost, nothing is so powerful as scent. The faint, subtle breath of some remembered perfume will waft thought and memory back as if by enchantment; and scenes long past spring into life, voices long silent echo in our ears, tender, half-forgotten words come back to thrill our hearts again and waken tears of longing, or regret.

Come and gaze on our face once more,
Bring us the smiles of the olden days;
Come and shine in your place once more
And change the dark into golden rays.
Gone! Gone! Joy is fled from us
Into the night of the nevermore,
And darkness rests where once you shed for us
Light we will miss for evermore.

* * * * *

No world-hardened woman, no reckless adventuress stood there in that midnight solitude now.

The hand of Time turned back for her the pages of intervening years. For one hour she gave herself up to the spell of memory, and the records of that mad, glad, reckless girlhood for whose follies she had paid so heavy a price.

“FRAGS.” FROM “PEG’S DIARY.”

“If ever I look back I shall like to remember what a good time I have had! As long as I can remember no one has crossed me or coerced me; I’ve done just what I pleased, and shall continue to do so even if I marry, which I suppose I shall do some day; not yet awhile though. From seventeen to twenty are the three best years of a girl’s life. I’ll have every bit of good out of them that can be had. I’ll *live*. Live to my finger-tips, laugh, jest, enjoy! but I won’t *love*; that means moping, brooding, discontent, worry, and wrinkles. Let as many love me as like; but, Peg, be wise, keep yourself heart-whole if you want to be happy.

* * * * *

“I hope I shall never get tired of dancing—I do so love it. They say I’m the best dancer in the county. Is that why I get so many partners? How jealous the O’Brady’s, and Rushton’s, and Craufords all are of me! There’s nothing too bad to say—I’m a coquette, I’m extravagant, I’m immodest (because my lace tucker is an inch lower than their scraggy necks can bear), I laugh too much! Oh, there’s no end to the catalogue of sins! But propriety’s always dull, and I hate dulness. How shocked they looked when I said that wit and intelligence were as good as all the virtues put together, and far more pleasant! I always respect successful iniquities, and have more sympathy with sinners than with saints, even in fiction.

* * * * *

“There’s a sinner here, by the way. He’s just home from England; ‘Morrison’s son,’ they call him; I don’t know his other name; but the father’s a bad lot, and no one has a good word for him or his son, despite their wealth. They live about five miles off from Carrig-duve; but the house is so shut in by trees that I’ve never had a good look at it. Old Morrison’s not often there; he goes abroad a great deal, and the boy has been at school or college ever since I can remember.

* * * * *

"I've seen him at last !

"He's the handsomest fellow for miles round ; they'll all have to look out for their laurels now. 'Twas in the post-office we met. I went in for some stamps, and he was leaning against the counter talking to Mrs. Maloney. How he looked at me !

"Of course, I didn't pretend to notice it. (Long eyelashes are very useful sometimes.) He left the shop first, so Mrs. Maloney told me who he was.

"It's odd that every one calls him only 'Morrison's son.' I never remember a Mrs. Morrison at Rooklands. Perhaps his father married a foreigner. The son is dark, but gloriously handsome. Like a Spanish brigand, I think.

"I wonder if I shall meet him anywhere. The Craufords have a dance to-night. Perhaps he's invited. I hope so. I'll put on my pink silk on the chance. Nothing becomes me like pink or white, but I'll favour the first for this occasion ; besides, the dress is fresher, and a better fit than the muslin.

* * * * *

"He was at the Craufords.

"Young Crauford, it appears, was a school-fellow, and they met yesterday, and so he asked him in to-night. *Mère* Crauford seemed rather put out about it. I don't know why she should be. As for myself it was the usual, 'I came ! I saw ! I conquered !'

"Now, I don't say this out of conceit, but Denis Morrison was a fearful case of 'love at first sight' ; nor did he leave me long in doubt about it. He's only nineteen or twenty, but, thank Heaven ! there's no *gaucherie* or hobble-de-hoyness about him. I remember reading somewhere that a man always interests a woman best by audacity. Your timid and modest fellow never gets a second thought. Well, my new admirer was audacious enough to get a good many 'second thoughts' from me.

"'You're such a cool, delightful little devil,' said he to me once this evening. 'Talking to you is as good as a draught of champagne.'

"If that was so, he certainly went in extensively for the 'champagne' of my conversation.

"He confided all his hopes and ambitions to me. He was determined to be either a soldier or a sailor ; a life of adventure was essential. He hated stagnation. He looked so bold and handsome and daring that I could quite believe it, and more—I could understand it was an impossible state of existence for him.

"In some things he is so boyish still ! There's a curious mingling of depths and shallows, hardihood and judgment in his nature. At present all is chaos and turbulence. As a rule, I hate boys. No male creature under thirty is worth taking seriously. The others are a mixture of idiot and animal, boor and fop. Why is it they take so much more knocking into shape than women, and such a much longer time to be knocked into it ? I'll leave that conundrum unanswered, and go to bed and dream perhaps of Denis Morrison's wicked eyes and audacious compliments.

* * * * *

"How often we've met !

"It can't be *always* accident !

"He's not very popular in the neighbourhood. A 'sense of mystery'

floats about him, as Hood says of his haunted house. What it is I can't imagine. I've asked Quinlan, my nurse, who is generally up in all the gossip of the place, but she won't say anything more than that there have always been 'queer stories' of Wild Morrison, as the father was called, and that the boy was a 'regular young devil,' and up to any bit of mischief imaginable from the time he could walk alone till he went to college.

"He goes to very few houses where we visit. Our meetings are mostly out of doors. If he does not see me for two or three days he haunts the lane beyond our orchard. Once he even ventured the orchard itself. Dad was away from home; perhaps that was as well; I hardly think he would have liked so unceremonious a visitor.

"October gales have begun their pranks; rain clouds replace sunshine and blue sky. I feel melancholy and out of sorts. We have had a desperate quarrel. He wanted me to confess I cared for him more than for Harrie Brady; as I wouldn't say so he showered abuse and accusations upon me and flung himself off in a pet.

"I was too astounded and angry to care very much at first. But three days have passed and my wrath has begun to cool. It seems rather strange that he has not made an attempt to see me, or write to me; he has always been the first to come round in any difference or disagreement. It is stranger still that I should miss him so much; usually it has been 'out of sight, out of mind,' with me and my sweet-hearts. Well, if he chooses to sulk I shall amuse myself by flirting with Harrie more than ever; not that there's any comparison between them, but Denis Morrison will never know I think so.

* * * * *

"Thank goodness, the hunting will soon commence!

"No better cure for low spirits and moping than a good rousing gallop over stiff country. My little Irish mare and I are of one mind on that point, and our reputation 'second to none,' in the hunting-field.

"For a whole month I've heard and seen nothing of my fiery lover. I am too proud to ask for news; I only conjecture he has gone to Dublin. Well, I am not going to fret over his loss! He shall hear that Peg O'Hara has never flirted so desperately, laughed so gaily, danced so lightly, or ridden so recklessly as now, when he in his vanity would fain believe her fretting her heart out for his absence, or regretting the cruelty that banished him."

* * * * *

The reader paused, and closed the book, and for a moment stood there motionless, one hand pressed to her eyes.

"How well I remember that time!" she said to herself. "The pain, the weariness, the long empty days, the perpetual effort to *seem* the same. Oh! he was very cruel,—and then my accident, and the dreary winter passed on the couch, and the news of his entanglement with that hateful woman in Dublin, and at last—at last—that letter. I was so weak, and so tired of being unhappy, and life only seemed to begin for me *then*, for oh, I had loved you all the time, my darling, all the time!"

She glanced at the book where it had fallen among the letters and the withered flowers.

"I haven't courage to read any more to-night," she said, and locked the box and pushed it away with a sort of desperate earnestness.

* * * * *

CHAPTER VIII

LOOKING FORWARD

WITH hair neatly braided, and with a trim, if well-worn, morning gown Miss Em entered the breakfast-room next morning almost on the stroke of the clock.

Mrs. O'Hara, carefully measuring out the second teaspoonful of tea for the pot, looked up in astonishment.

"Is the world coming to an end?" she exclaimed.

"I hope not," said Miss Em briskly. "I want a good deal more out of it first."

Her eyes were on the letters, but she would not allow her anxiety to appear, and calmly waited till her father had sorted and peered into them in his usual slow methodical fashion.

No disappointment this time! There was Lady Patricia's letter; and if anything could have added zest to her unappetising meal, those bright, cheery lines and spicy bits of gossip, as well as the certainty of a successful issue to her scheme, might well have done so.

"MY DEAR CHILD," wrote Lady Pat, "of *course* I'm delighted to have you! I telegraphed yesterday to save time. I've put up at the Gresham, having let my house, as I intend leaving Ireland for some time. You know what *that* means. They make you very comfortable here, and one's saved the worry of servants; and when two or three choice spirits drop in to lunch or dinner, oh! the blessing of feeling everything will be right without the bother of preparation. Why don't we all live in hotels, like those dear Americans? Be sure you come on Tuesday, as your Dublin dissipation will commence on Wednesday with the Kellys' ball. (Have you heard of it?) The day I received your letter I met her at luncheon, at the Vanecourts, Stephen's Green; I mentioned that a friend was coming to stay with me, and angled for your invitation. On hearing the friend's name Mrs. Kelly was more than delighted. Couldn't understand how she could have forgotten you, and begged me to make apologies. Hope you've got a good gown. *Every one* will be there; I hear the Lord Lieutenant has been 'caught' for it. I'm sure Lady A. won't put in an appearance. Altogether it will be an *omnium gatherum*, and, as Paddy Kearney would say, 'there'll be ructions!' I hear from his sister, who is coming out (she is downright pretty, my dear), that he has been staying in your part of the country. Should you, he, and the MacShamus meet, what a cosy whist party! How is my dear doctor? all kind remembrances to both. By the bye, I was forgetting: make preparations for a lengthened stay; indeed, if I know you right, you're not likely to be wanting to rush back to Castle Glum and Madame Skinflint in a hurry. I have a little proposition to make to you, but it must stand over till we meet. I'm sorry to say poor Agnes is much worse; she's going exactly like her sweet mother. To take her abroad this winter is impossible; I've given her two turns to Cannes, as you know, but no real benefit has ensued. You've not written to me since you left Yorkshire. Is it true that the L'Estranges have come into such a lot of money? not before it was wanted, I'm sure. I've heard bailiffs were pretty frequent visitors *there*! You say nothing of your father; I hope he is well. As for madame, you

know my opinion, and I don't pay the empty compliment of inquiries in *that* quarter. Well, my dear child, a week won't exhaust all we have to say to one another. Get as much good out of rural life and early hours as you possibly can; there'll not be much beauty-sleep for you *here*. *Au revoir* till Tuesday. I cannot meet you at the station, as I've an engagement; but come direct here; I've secured a bedroom next my own, and the faithful Anne will do everything for your comfort. We shall be quite by ourselves on Tuesday night, but can dine at the *table d'hôte* if you prefer it. Love and kisses, my dear Emilia,

"From your ever affectionate,
"PATRICIA MOIRA.

P.S.—I have discovered a *treasure* of a dressmaker if you want anything done; I have patronised her largely. You needn't mind what you give her,—she'll even *patch*, so bring anything that wants renovating!"

Miss Em laid down the letter with a sigh of content. Her satisfaction was so evident that Mrs. O'Hara, whose attention had already been excited by the length of the epistle, and who had recognised the coroneted cipher on the envelope, could not restrain a remark. "You seem mightily pleased with your letter," she said.

"Lady Pat's letters are always charming," answered Miss Em, folding the closely written sheets together with a smile of triumph.

"Oh, is it from Lady Patricia Moira?" inquired Mrs. O'Hara suavely.

If she revered any one on earth it was her step-daughter's aristocratic godmother, who, in years gone by, she had alternately toadied and abused. For Lady Pat had never pretended to regard her as anything but a vulgar upstart, or forgiven Mr. O'Hara for giving such a mistress to Carrig-duve.

"Yes, it is from Lady Patricia Moira," replied Miss Em, "and she has asked me to Dublin to stay with her. I shall go next Tuesday."

"You certainly don't favour your home with much of your society," sneered Mrs. O'Hara. "I wonder you like to be always sponging on strangers in the manner you do."

"I was not aware that Lady Pat was 'a stranger,'" said Miss Em hotly. "And if I give 'home,' as you call it, little of my society, it is for the very excellent reason that I am happier out of it. We needn't go into details at this time of day. I think you know them as well as I do."

"I know that I have never experienced anything but rudeness and ingratitude at your hands," answered her stepmother; "that all my sacrifices and efforts have been misrepresented, that you have spoken against me to all your friends, and prevented me from taking my proper position in the county by your falsehoods and insolence."

"All of which means that Lady Pat snubbed you years ago, and that the county followed her example," said Miss Em coolly. "Popularity isn't such an easy matter as you seem to imagine."

"Popularity, indeed! If I laid myself out for it in the way *some* people do, I should have enough and to spare."

"Is that the reason you prefer to 'spare' it?" asked Miss Em. "How little contents you! For my part I've never had enough yet."

She took up her letter again and glanced at it as if the conversation did not possess much interest for her.

"How long are you going to stay with Lady Patricia?" asked Mrs. O'Hara presently.

"A month," answered her step-daughter at random, "or longer perhaps," she added, shooting "the arrow at a venture" in her usual reckless fashion. "If she goes abroad, I may very probably go with her."

"Don't expect us to find the money for foreign travels, then," snapped Mrs. O'Hara. "Your extravagance has crippled us nicely as it is."

"That's rather stale hearing by this time," retorted Miss Em. "Surely what you term my 'extravagance' has been more than atoned for by your judicious system of cheese-paring. Thank goodness," she added with a sigh of relief as she pushed back her chair, "that I shall see a decent table again, and know what a dinner means when I leave here."

And she left the room to avoid further sparring, and to pen a long and chatty epistle, such as her soul loved, to Lady Pat.

"It was a bold stroke, but it has succeeded admirably," she thought to herself with pardonable triumph. "But the diamonds have yet to be secured. My dress will be nothing without them. I'm sure Lady Pat will let me have some lace. I declare, I think I'll leave the bodice alone now, and trust to this dressmaker she mentions."

She had drawn her table over to the window, and sat there now, the letter lying before her, her cheek resting on her hand, while the other was employed in idly tracing lines and figures on the blotting-paper.

Her thoughts wandered vaguely to and fro, settling on nothing, yet with a restless desire to find anchorage.

Successful schemers are not always proud of achieved success. There are victories as humiliating as defeat, though the fact may be known to none but the victor. Miss Em, like many a great political genius, was far happier in working for a purpose than in the actual accomplishment of the purpose itself. That oddly balanced temperament of hers swung to and fro like an uneasy pendulum, and recognised in her present success only an omen of future failure. "When things come right too easily 'tis a bad sign, so Quinlan used to say. Hallo! what's that?"

The sound of angry voices and loud argument reached her, and she raised her head and listened intently.

"My amicable stepmother again! What's poor Quinny been doing now, I wonder? Perhaps she's discovered about the whisky last night. I quite forgot to ask Quin where she got it, by the way."

A knock at the door cut short her reflections. "Come in!" she cried, guessing who was the applicant.

"Why, Quinny!" she exclaimed, looking with astonishment at the old woman's angry face, "what on earth's the matter?"

"Matter!" repeated the old housekeeper, in loud indignant tones. "Is it the matter ye're asking about? Indeed, then, Miss Peg, I'd like to know what in the name of all the saints in glory Saint Patrick was about, when he druv all the snakes and reptiles out of Ireland and forgot to send all the mane ould women to kape thim company?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you, Quinny," said Miss Em, smiling; "but what's put you out so?"

"Faith, alannah! little enough, but that I was just givin' Bridget Lehane, the poor crathur, and she just afther losing her own mother last night—(God rest her soul!) a bit of salt fish and a morsil of drippin' you couldn't blind a fly's eye with, whin Mrs. O'Hara comes out and catches

me. Och! the divil! sich a *shawn-a-mauling* as I got! you'd think I'd robbed her of her last bite and sup! But faith, Miss Peg, darlin', I spoke up as saucy as a latch. I wonder she didn't give me the warnin' as she's always threatenin'. Maybe she knows, though, 'tisn't Mary Quinlan would be long wantin' a place. Don't all the quality know her worth, as well as they know that many's the fine dinner they've had here in the ould days whin Carrig-duve was kept up in the best style, and no one had call to be ashamed of it? And isn't it meself, tho' none so young as I was, that can roast and baste and serve up wid the best of them? I tould the mistress so. Och, indeed, and I did; but I'll be even wid her yet," she added more calmly, and with a cautious glance around; "when I gets a commission I does it, and"—significantly,—"*I've got me eye on thim.*"

"On them? on what, Quinny?" asked Miss Em, looking rather puzzled.

"Shure, darlin', you're not after forgettin' what you asked me? The *kays*, of course. 'Twill be all right, honey, never you fear."

"But not too soon, Quinny," urged Miss Em. "I wouldn't for worlds have the diamonds missed till I'm safe out of the way."

"They won't be missed, trust me for that. Divil a sowl shall get wind or word of it till they're safe in your kapin'; and aren't they your own by all lawful right, and no interlopers havin' any call to them at all, at all? Bad scran to them!"

"There's something very satisfactory in receiving an endorsement of one's own opinion," thought Miss Em. "It can't be wrong to take possession of one's lawful possessions; all the same, I'd rather not have had to do it in this fashion."

She let Quinlan ramble on uninterruptedly for some moments. At last she interrupted a string of personal grievances by a question.

"Did Bridget Lehane tell you anything about—I mean, did she mention any one having arrived lately?" she asked.

Quinlan nodded. "Yes, darlin'! 'Tis true, 'twas Morrison's son you saw. He's been away in foreign parts all these years. The talk in the village is that he's come home with hapes of money. I suppose, too, the ould gentleman will be lavin' him his fortune. 'Tis hard to come at the rights o' *that* story, Miss Peg; but there's them as sez that the mother was no foreigner at all, but could be found a dale nearer home than people think for."

"It matters very little now," said Miss Em wearily. "It was always a case of 'give a dog a bad name' with Denis Morrison. Even if he got Rooklands and all the money, I'm sure he wouldn't live in this part of the country again."

The old woman looked at her curiously. There were times when, well as she knew Miss Em, she was baffled and bewildered by her. That she should have been so upset the previous night and appear so indifferent this morning were contradictions she could not reconcile.

"I'll find out all about him if you wish," she said cautiously. "But shure you're goin' off wid yourself next week, so why need you be troublin' your head about him, or any one else here? 'Tis the grand time you'll be havin' in Dublin, Miss Peg. You know that all the Castle people are goin' there?"

"Yes; Captain Kearney told me."

"The captain thinks a mighty lot o' ye, Miss Peg, darlin'. Shure, if I'd the chance betwixt him and his uncle, it's the young man I'd be selectin'."

"But there's no question of either, Quinny," laughed Miss Em; "Sir Jasper has quite dropped out of my sight these last ten years; as for the captain he's much too young, leaving out of the question that he's in love with his cousin."

"Miss Molly's a beauty, and no mistake," said the old woman. "But faith, Miss Peg, ne'er a one o' them can hold a candle to yourself whin ye ware a gurl. 'Tis mad I feel whin I think of the chances you've thrown away. Not but what you're a fine woman still, and when you're dressed at night and laughin' and jokin' as I've seen you, no one would iver say ye ware thirty."

Miss Em laughed. "You old flatterer!" she said; "there—go along, and get on with your work, or there'll be another scrimmage. I'll go down to the village presently, and give Bridget something to make up for her loss of salt fish and dripping."

"Ah, that's like your generous heart, Miss Peg. Didn't we always say of you that you'd give away the wurld if ye had it?"

"Quinlan!" rang sharply out from the corridor. "Haven't you finished that room yet? half an hour's surely enough time for you."

"Go, Quinny dear," said Miss Em; "there's no use in riling her more; she'll have enough vexation next week."

"Faith, and that's true," chuckled the old woman; and picking up her duster she left the room.

CHAPTER IX

A CHURCH PARADE

Two days of rain and gloom, and heavy clouds brooding over earth and sky ushered in a Sunday fit for April, so radiant was the morning with blue and gold, and fresh rain-washed leaves of arbutus, and laurel hedges, and late blossoms of autumn flowers that winter had spared.

Miss Em, opening her eyes on such a changed scene, felt her resolution of a lazy morning and breakfast in bed rapidly vanishing. She made her toilet with unusual care. A prolonged study of *The Queen*, which she took regularly every week, had suggested a new style of hair-dressing which she essayed for the first time. It proved eminently successful, and allowed of her dispensing with quite half of the massive plaits that for long had more disfigured than adorned the back of her head. "I must practise that style till I get it right for Wednesday," she said, as, hand-glass in hand, she surveyed profile, back, and front view. "I declare I look ten years younger; and 'tis so easy. I wonder if Madame O'Hara will notice any difference."

If madame did she was not going to flatter her obnoxious step-daughter by any allusion to the change, or the improvement it had wrought. The fact of coming down to breakfast a full quarter of an hour late, and dressed in the Bond Street costume previously mentioned, were a palpable advertisement of church-going intentions.

As a rule Miss Em spent her Sunday mornings in bed with a novel, and her afternoons in letter-writing. It was rarely that she accompanied her people, and favoured the O'Hara pew with her presence. The vicar was not a brilliant specimen of his order; and his sermons, Miss Em declared, were so far below even average intelligence that they irritated her.

However, on this particular Sunday she seemed to have put prejudice aside with the rusty and superfluous plaits that were shut in her dressing-table drawer, and was altogether so amiable and entertaining that Mrs. O'Hara could not but wonder in vulgar parlance "what was in the wind."

Perhaps Miss Em herself was only vaguely conscious of any special reason for this church-going freak. Certainly there was something strained and unnatural in her manner as they passed up the old yew-shaded path, exchanging occasional greetings with neighbours; and she kept close beside her father, instead of marching in advance in her usual independent manner. Apprehension, too, was in the nervous glance that swept aisle and gallery from the vantage-point of the high box-like pew. Yet absentees and devotees were marked with unfailing precision.

As the service proceeded she felt more at ease. Doubt became certainty, and fear ceased to quicken her heart-throbs, or set her pulses fluttering. The church was unusually full, and Miss Em arranged an after-service programme of greetings and gossip that promised to compensate for her present martyrdom.

The day still held its promise, making winter gowns and mantles take a reproachful shabbiness that rebuked premature sunshine. Miss Em felt safe on *that* point; and the excellence of a well-preserved complexion added to her satisfaction as she stood receiving and exchanging greetings which proved her popularity to be still unimpaired. Mrs. O'Hara had passed on with a grim and vinegarish expression after hearing her step-daughter accept an invitation to lunch with the MacShamuses, and seen cordial greetings exchanged between her and the Castle Lustrell folk. These amenities were as gall and wormwood to the mean ambitious woman whose place in the county had been so clearly marked off for her, and whose unpopularity was as sure as it certainly was deserved.

Miss Em was standing beside the vicar's wife when a pompous-looking woman, over-dressed in velvet and furs, and evidently on excellent terms with herself, passed them. She bowed, and then extended her hand to the old lady, but quite ignored her companion.

"Don't you know Miss O'Hara, Mrs. Markham?" asked Mrs. Pigott innocently, with a view to setting things right.

The lady apparently gave herself up to an effort of memory and an eye-glass, and vaguely murmured of "not having the pleasure."

"I believe we met once, about two years ago," said Miss Em in her coldest and clearest tones. "In Dublin, was it not?"

"You—you really have the advantage of me," murmured Mrs. Markham, getting hot and red and generally uncomfortable beneath the smiling gaze of those clear grey eyes. "I certainly was in Dublin two or three years ago, but——"

"Not at a luncheon-party at Lady Blake's?" asked Miss Em innocently, knowing perfectly well that the Markhams would have given their right hands to be invited to such a house. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I must have confused you with some one else. Really, one meets so many people nowadays, society is so mixed. I heard of a case of knighthood the other day where the gentleman actually borrowed his wife's name, his own being lost in obscurity. You are staying here, I suppose, Mrs. Marks?"

"Markham is *my* name," answered the lady, with an indignant glance at this impertinent person. "We have come to reside in the county."

"Mr. Markham has bought River's Court, my dear," said the vicar's

wife in explanation. "And they are restoring it in the most lavish manner. You are away so much that these things come quite as news to you."

"Indeed, they do," affirmed Miss Em. "Dear me, restoring River's Court! Do you know, I've quite a horror of that word! It means all sorts of dreadful modern vulgarities, miscalled 'improvements' by house decorators and upholsterers. But the good old families are fast dying out, and it is impossible, I suppose, for strangers to recognise that taste and suitability are more important than flashy splendour."

A "taste of the O'Hara tongue" had once been a proverb in the county. Miss Em felt a keen delight in reviving it at such an opportunity. She knew as well as Mrs. Markham herself where they had really met, and why that lady pretended to ignore the fact.

There could be but one answer to that last remark. Not even the eye-glass was proof against it. Mrs. Markham hurriedly murmured that the carriage was waiting, and with an ungraceful bow hastened away in its direction, a mass of crimson humiliation, whose very outward splendour seemed conscious of the amused glance that followed, and the sarcastic comments that would signalise her retreat.

"O'Hara, O'Hara," she repeated to herself. "Yes, of course I remember. A poor middle-aged shabby adventuress I thought her; perhaps she has come in for some money; she seems to be thought a great deal of here. I declare one never knows how to treat these Irish families. I suppose I've put my foot in it. I wonder if she knows the Lustrells? How provoking if she does!"

"You were very severe on her, Miss O'Hara," said the vicar's wife as the portly figure disappeared.

"Was I?" said Miss Em indifferently. "Well, I detest these *nouveaux riches*, who are taking up all our good old places. Manchester cotton spinners, and retired sausage makers like the Burtons settling down and pretending they're as good as any one in the county. Of course you will say this sounds very uncharitable, Mrs. Pigott, but you must allow for Irish prejudices." Mrs. Pigott was English herself and of no particular family or account. She had been a victim to social and financial eclipse for the greater part of her meek, over-burdened life, and was quite content to allow for Irish prejudices, or any other peculiarity of that interesting nation, if it was conducive to peace and quietness. She adroitly turned the conversation, and as some other people came up at the same moment, Miss Em moved away and rejoined the doctor's wife.

The face she had feared, yet half-longed to recognise, was not there. Possibly the ordeal of church-going had been more than he could brave. Relief and disappointment were mingled strangely in her heart; her eager acceptance of Mrs. MacShamus's offer arose mainly from a desire to hear something she dared not ask. The doctor would know, even if his wife were ignorant on the point.

"Jerry was called away to Rooklands," said the old lady presently as they passed down the village. "Old Morrison is very ill, they say."

"So I've heard," answered Miss Em. "Do you know what's the matter?"

"A general break-up, the doctor says. He lived a hard life, and tried his constitution more than most men of his age. He's a very troublesome patient to manage."

Miss Em made no observation. Good actress as she was, and hardened as she professed to be to most emotions, she could not bring herself to utter that one name indifferently. She kept the conversation on trivial matters until they reached the house; but time slipped by, the luncheon hour had long passed, and yet the doctor made no appearance on the scene. At last they sat down to the meal without him, Mrs. MacShamus giving it as her opinion that "old Morrison" must be worse, and the doctor did not like to leave him.

Miss Em knew that it was the old lady's custom to have a nap on Sunday afternoons; and anxious as she was to see the doctor she had too much tact to make a prolonged stay. She bade her good-bye, with a half promise to look in the next evening if she could manage to get through her packing; it was one of her peculiarities never to do that till the last minute, and to make her departure a scene of confusion that left every one in as much excitement as herself, so the promise held little hope of fulfilment.

The sunshine of the morning had faded into a grey soft haziness, as if the brilliant day had already repented of its prodigal gifts. Miss Em avoided the main street, experience having taught her that it was wiser to do this on Sunday afternoons, as most of the boys and men in the neighbourhood had a predilection for playing bowls along the road, a habit which even magisterial warnings and fines could not check. She took a lane that lay to the right of the doctor's house and wound in tortuous fashion to a branch of the river that usually was little more than a creek. Midway, the lane twisted to the margin of some low-lying fields, whence a little path led into a wood, lovely in summer-time when flowers decked and birds haunted it, but desolate enough now with the grey gloom of the January sky spread above its leafless trees.

Miss Em paused before entering it. Nothing but a dread of the boys, and anxiety for her London-made costume, would have made her choose this lonely and desolate path. As she glanced down between crooked tree-stems and tangled underwood, she was surprised to see two figures sauntering slowly along.

As they came nearer an involuntary smile broke over her face. They were Molly Lustrell and Paddy Kearney.

She moved forward and greeted them with enthusiasm.

"Do walk back with me!" she entreated; "I was just dreading that lonely wood, and you can take the short cut back to the castle instead of the lane."

"Won't it make us very late?" said Molly, with an apprehensive glance at her cousin.

She was a lovely girl of eighteen, lovely enough to justify all the encomiums Miss Em had lavished on her beauty.

"Not a bit of it," he answered reassuringly; "besides, what does it matter if we are? You won't get more scolding for two sins than one, and as for me"—he shrugged his broad shoulders with a gesture of indifference—"well, I'm too used to rows to mind them."

"Are you out without leave?" asked Miss Em significantly, looking from one to the other.

Molly Lustrell coloured slightly.

"Aunt Sabina went to sleep," she said; "and papa was shut up in the library——"

"And we were too considerate to disturb either of them by asking permission for a trifle of liberty," interposed Paddy, laughing.

"Indeed, I don't blame you," said Miss Em, as they all turned into the wood. "And 'tis great luck I met you. I've been lunching with Mrs. MacShamus, and I couldn't make my mind up to face those bowl-players from the village; I knew they'd be up to their Sunday pranks, so I thought I'd come this way, and get home in peace."

"You're going to Dublin, I hear," said Molly. "I'm so glad. I do wish you were to chaperon me instead of Aunt Sabina. She'll spoil all my pleasure, I'm sure."

"And mine," said Paddy Kearney with a sigh.

"I promise to do all I can," said Miss Em eagerly. "I think you know, though, that Miss Lustrell is no great friend to me."

"Nor to any one," said Molly, pouting. "Sometimes I feel quite sorry I've left school, I had no idea what a life I was going to have at home."

A murmur into a rose-tipped ear seemed to breathe of sympathy at this announcement; Miss Em was conveniently deaf, and busied herself with disentangling her skirt from an aggressive bramble.

"If we all found life what we imagined or wished it to be," she said at last, "this would be a much pleasanter vale of woe to travel through. But it's only natural for youth to rebel against all that is obnoxious to, or opposes it. A few years hence, Molly, you won't be for beating that pretty head against stone walls, but just accept things philosophically, the good with the bad. Fate does throw us a few white beans among the black, as a rule."

"Few people take life as well as you do, Miss Em," said Paddy Kearney. "You're a standing reproach to all the grumblers."

"Oh, she said, with her bright laugh, "that's the fault, or virtue, of my nature. I simply *won't* mope and be down-hearted. Besides, there's always a comic side, even to misfortune, if you like to look for it."

"Faith, I'd look keenly enough if I could hope to find one," said Paddy. "But that's a side my troubles have never shown to me, Miss Em."

"They can't be very heavy yet," she answered. "A few tailor's bills, and the inconvenience of not getting as much leave as you would like, that's the sum-total, I suppose?"

"Indeed, I wish it was," said the young man, a momentary cloud on his bright face.

"Give up cards, Paddy," said Miss Em warningly. "They wake up a vice before we are aware of it. Many's the time I've been sorrier for success than loss. But all the O'Haras are born gamblers. Do you remember my Aunt Bedelia? Well, she's nearer seventy than sixty now, I'm sure, and as keen on play as ever. She has told me that when she was a girl she'd either lose or double her allowance the very day she received it. All her jewels went long ago—I've got some, by the way. The sight of a card or the rattle of the dice-box would wake her up from her death-sleep, I do believe."

"But Paddy doesn't gamble, does he?" asked Molly anxiously.

"No-o, of course; only a game now and then, at sixpenny points," said Miss Em reassuringly.

But the captain made haste to change the subject of conversation. His cousin was too young and too inexperienced to take as lenient a view of the follies and amusements of men as Miss Em did. He had no desire

to appear absolutely faultless in her eyes, but on the other hand he had less inclination to force her into the position of an accusing angel—even if a forgiving one.

To a girl who is very young and very innocent the minor offences of men assume proportions out of all keeping with their actual sinfulness. Hero-worship and idealisation are peculiar to feminine youth. But, flattering as they undoubtedly are, they are apt to affect men less agreeably than might be supposed. To feel they are undeserved is as trying as the knowledge that it is impossible to live up to the expectations on which they are founded. "Love me and make the best of me," is the lover's prayer for himself in the first flush and zest of adoration.

The woman may be less humble, because more conscious of her own deserts, offering meekly, yet with perfect sincerity, the white unstained page of maiden truth, unscored, unblotted by any name save that of the dream-prince for whom she has waited.

Paddy Kearney was very much in love and very desirous to stand well in the eyes of his cousin. But he had not been immaculate, neither had he "scorned delights and lived laborious days," so as to be worthier of her who should one day stoop to lift him to her heart. He had failed in many things, and fallen oft and low from the heights of good resolutions. But he was not vicious or immoral, and far more inclined to reverence women for the good there *was* in them than for the evil there *might* be.

The flames at which he had singed his wings were not such as scorch or destroy the faith of youth; and from his boyhood up there had lived in his heart a certain tender memory of the lovely child who had been his pet and plaything, shared his hopes, listened to his ambitions, and sympathised with him in all the scrapes and troubles of schoolboy life. Years of separation had sent him into the world to fight his own battles, and for long they had not met. But under all Paddy Kearney's buoyancy and light-heartedness lingered a strong reverence for kindred, and a strong clinging to early affections and early ties. No one had ever stood to him quite in the place of pretty Molly Lustrell, and at the present stage of his history he had convinced himself that no one could ever do so.

The obstacle of her father's coldness and opposition was only another incentive to his passion; as yet it was only hovering on the border lines of avowal, uncertain of tenure, and abject under tyranny. He could not be sure in what light his cousin regarded him. Her face and her words were alike enigmatical, neither had she faced the world as yet, nor received any wider homage than the limited sphere of home and school life afforded.

It was this test which her lover foresaw and feared. Selfishness prompted a declaration of the love that trembled on his lips a hundred times a day, but wisdom counselled a more prudent course. A girl's heart, untried, unknowing itself, rich in impulses, generous, and self-sacrificing; would it be right to take advantage of such an one? His better nature said "No,"—that side of it at least which yields to the poetic phase of passion. Let her look out on life, mix with and judge of others, weigh him in the balance if she would, then decide for herself. Storms he foresaw in plenty, wrath of guardians, opposition, tyranny; but for such things he cared nothing if only she would love him as he loved her.

* * * * *

"Here we are out of the wood," said Miss Em, breaking in upon a prolonged silence. "I suppose we must part now; I can't in conscience

detain you longer. Molly, if your Aunt Sabina scolds you lay the blame on me, I'll have it out with her in Dublin!"

She shook hands with them both, laughing gaily to the last.

Perhaps it was only the swaying boughs that threw so dark a shadow on her face as she paused and looked back at the two absorbed young figures. "If youth could last!" the wind seemed to sigh in her ear. "If only youth could last!"

CHAPTER X

SPOILING THE EGYPTIANS

CHAOS itself had no mean representation in the sight afforded by Miss Em's room the next morning.

To some women—and assuredly she was one—packing is only another word for wholesale confusion. The turning out of drawers and wardrobes, the selecting of necessary and unnecessary articles, the difficulty of determining what to take and what to leave behind, seem a necessary part of the business.

The ordeal of "selection" once passed, Miss Em had an elaborate system of stowing away and locking and sealing what was left behind for fear of prying eyes during her absence. Then the actual work of packing commenced, the neatest of trunks and most perfect of travelling gear being essentials which she never overlooked. No objectionable tin trunk or canvas-covered box, rendered still more unsightly by the rope cordage popularly supposed to be a safeguard against weak locks and strong porters, ever distinguished her journeys, or called forth the sneers of footmen or compassion of ladies' maids. But it must be confessed that the preparations for such journeys gave little promise of a hopeful result, and Quinlan described herself as "fairly run off her legs" while yet that Monday morning was young.

"Fold that skirt carefully, Quinny, and remember the fine handkerchiefs go in the *sachet*. If I arrive at the Gresham without a maid 'tis no reason that I shouldn't *seem* to have left one behind me. Leave that black satin alone. It has to go on the top, I want it for the ball——"

"The ball, Miss Peg! but shure, the bodice is all to pieces," exclaimed Quinlan. "You're never goin' to put that ould rag on ye?"

"Indeed but I am," answered her mistress. "Old rag do you call it? Just wait and see what a bit of good lace and a few——" She stopped abruptly. "Not much time now, Quinny dear. Do you think you can manage those keys?"

The old woman nodded mysteriously. "When it wants a quarter of an hour or so to the luncheon-time, Miss Peg, just you be on the look-out. Faith, I've got the nate little schame in me head, and sorra a bit will she be discoverin' anything this long while."

"She may be discovering what she likes once I'm off," said Miss Em, selecting her neatest pair of boots and putting them on one side. Unexceptionable foot-gear and gloves of the best make and fit were among her travelling maxims. Everything taut and trim. No fluttering ribbons or draggled flounces, or loosely tied veils ever disfigured her appearance. She was the sort of woman men like as a companion on a journey, never flustered or fidgety, never worrying guards and porters with needless

questions, never mean in the way of fees and tips. Cool, collected, business-like, neat to look at, and pleasant to talk to, it was no wonder Miss Em was a favourite with young and old.

"There'll be fine *hullagoning* when she finds the jule-case gone!" chuckled Quinlan, as she shook out a lace petticoat and carefully arranged its delicate frills.

"Oh, I won't take the case," said Miss Em hurriedly; "not if I can open it, that's to say. I want the necklace and the spray and bracelets, and a brooch or two, but I'll leave the rest. Lady Pat always lends me jewellery when I stay with her. Come now, Quinny, hurry, will you? It only wants an hour of luncheon now."

"Shure, darlin', you've all the afternoon and evening to finish up. Aren't ye takin' a power an' all of clothes wid ye this time?"

"I may go abroad, or to England," said Miss Em, giving a scrutinising glance at one or two well-worn garments which had already undergone the process of renovation.

She recalled Lady Pat's postscript and wondered whether the "treasure of a dressmaker" could possibly do anything with them.

"In any case they'd do for a dark day," she reflected, as a vision of the mud of "dear dirty Dublin" rose before her. "That old brown tweed is well-cut though it is shabby, very shabby, and it's been turned once. Shall I venture?" She caught Quinlan's eye. "The king can do no wrong," she said gaily; "and an O'Hara can wear what a Smith or Brown wouldn't dare be seen in. Pack it, Quinny dear; I'll venture."

For some time neither spoke, and the travelling trunk began to show signs of filling up. At last the old housekeeper paused to ask the time, and then commending her soul and herself and Miss Em jointly to the care of sundry "saints in glory," she cautiously left the room.

Miss Em felt strangely excited and curious as to what the "schame" was to be. A little nervous too as to results. Presently a cautious tap came at the door. She opened it, and saw Quinlan again.

"Now's yer time, honey," she said in a whisper. "She's in her room changing her gown. The kays of the bureau are in the pocket, the jule-case she kapes in the bottom drawer. I'm going to call her down to say the piece of beef has turned, and must be salted; shure, that'll bring her as quick as ould Nick himself. Whin ye hear her lave her bedroom, just step in. Trust me to kape her in the kitchen, and make noise enough to let ye know whin she's comin' back."

"All right, I quite understand," said Miss Em, softly retreating and closing the door.

In a few moments the loud concerned tones of Quinlan's voice and the bustle and confusion without, assured her that the campaign had opened.

She stepped out into the corridor and saw her stepmother hastily descending the stairs, wrapped in an old flannel dressing-gown, which she had evidently snatched up in a hurry.

Quick as thought Miss Em crossed the intervening space and entered the bedroom opposite. As Quinlan had said, the dress Mrs. O'Hara had worn all the morning had been removed, and lay carelessly on the bed.

A moment—and the keys were in Miss Em's possession.

A short delay ensued before she found the right one, but the drawer was speedily opened, and the jewel-case lay before her. Taking it out, Miss Em tried key after key in the lock; none of them fitted it.

Afraid to waste more time, she took the case as it was, and hastily relocking the bureau, put the keys back where she had found them.

The sound of angry voices in the hall expedited her movements, and assured her she was not a moment too soon. Mrs. O'Hara was loudly declaiming against her housekeeper's folly. The meat was perfectly good; the idea of pickling it was absurd, it was the luncheon hour and she would scarcely have time to change her wrapper, and so on.

Miss Em heard, and laughed softly to herself; her eyes had a vivid glow, her face something of the glee and delight of a child who has successfully carried out a scheme of mischief. But soon they were replaced by a look of anxiety. She put the jewel-case safely away in her box, and locked it. "Let us hope and pray that she won't take it into her head to look into that drawer for anything," she thought uneasily. "If she does, I scarcely see any hope of getting off scot-free; she would be certain to suspect me, especially if the governor has mentioned our conversation the other morning. There's the bell! I had better go down; if she knows I'm in the dining-room she will make all the more haste."

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Mrs. O'Hara was in the worst of tempers, but her step-daughter was provokingly amiable.

She accepted the scanty allowance of fat and lean which Mrs. O'Hara skilfully "pared" off the three days' joint with perfect equanimity, and drank the very "small" table-beer without a murmur.

"We should have had a hot luncheon if you had not detained Quinlan all the morning. One would think you were packing for a trip to the colonies," sneered the elder lady.

"I devoutly wish I was," answered Miss Em. "But there's no such luck yet."

"In my young days," continued her stepmother, "women were glad enough to stay by their own firesides, and not go trapesing over the world, inflicting themselves on strangers!"

"Perhaps so," said Miss Em tranquilly; "but the world has moved on apace since 'your' day and mine also. Besides, you are shooting a little wide of the mark when you call Lady Pat a 'stranger'; you forget she is my godmother."

"Judging from the rarity of her visits, it is *she* who appears to forget that."

"Carrig-duve has lost its popularity," observed Miss Em. "A thing unused may be ornamental; it is seldom useful."

"Are you going to be away very long, my dear?" asked her father gently.

"A month or two, so far as I know at present. But of course I'll write to you, governor."

Mrs. O'Hara shuddered visibly; she hated slang terms, and took every opportunity of showing how obnoxious Miss Em's mode of addressing her father was to her ears.

"Your letters are like your visits," she said coldly; "as rare—and as——"

"Unwelcome?" suggested Miss Em, seeing her pause for a word; "don't hesitate to say what I know you feel. Truth is a well-known English virtue, and no one could ever accuse *you* of having kissed the Blarney stone."

"I hate shams and affectations!" asserted Mrs. O'Hara.

Miss Em looked as if her stepmother's likings were a matter of no importance, and turned inquiring eyes upon the clock.

"Isn't your packing finished yet?" inquired the elder lady with affected astonishment.

"Dear me, no! I have heaps of things to see to, but I won't rob you of Quinlan again."

"You are really too considerate," said Mrs. O'Hara, rising from the table. "I hope you mean it, for she is all behind with her work, and I am going out to pay some visits this afternoon."

Miss Em looked up with unfeigned astonishment. Rare indeed were her stepmother's calls, unless some special motive—usually an ill-natured one—prompted the civility.

"I owe Mrs. MacShamus a visit," continued Mrs. O'Hara, "and I shall take Mrs. Pigott on my way."

"Botheration to the woman!" muttered Miss Em savagely; "and I'd made up my mind to go to the doctor's. I must borrow that money. Four pounds won't be nearly enough."

"This is Mrs. Pigott's afternoon for the mothers' meeting," she said aloud; "so you had better call first on Mrs. MacShamus."

"I am quite as well acquainted with my neighbours' affairs as you can be, Emilia," was the rejoinder, "and I require no advice on the subject"; and she took her angular form and rusty black draperies out of the room.

"Peggy," said her father timidly, as soon as they were alone, "I promised you a little money if I could manage it. 'Tis only three pounds, but you must make it do till it's time for your allowance. You can't be at much expense with Lady Patricia. She's very generous, and—and she understands how things are with us."

He held out the gold half apologetically to his daughter, but she took it with thankfulness.

"I'm spoiling the Egyptians to some purpose," she thought. "All the same, I'm sorry for the necessity; poor old governor, he looks as frightened as if he had stolen the money!"

Then she left the room to finish the labour of packing.

It was almost dark when she had locked and sealed and secured everything in a manner that satisfied herself; and throwing on a long dark cloak, adjusting the neat travelling-hat left ready for the morrow, she left the house for the visit to the doctor's wife.

She could not afford to be nervous now, though every rustling branch and chance shadow quickened her heart-beats to an uncomfortable extent. But whatever apprehensions she had, nothing happened to support them, and she reached the well-known gate and passed from there to the safe vantage-point of the house with a sigh of relief.

Mrs. MacShamus was alone, though it appeared that Miss Em had only missed her stepmother by some ten minutes.

"I can't stay very long. I've really only come to say good-bye," she said, as the old lady entreated her to remove her wraps. "Is the doctor in?"

"No, and I don't expect him until late," answered Mrs. MacShamus. "It is very provoking you should miss each other so often, for I know he's wanting to see you particularly. Why can't you stay dinner?"

Miss Em shook her head decidedly. "It's my last evening; I must go back."

"Well, I hope you'll have a pleasant time, my dear. But you're sure to with Lady Patricia. You'll have lots to tell when you come back. I shall be dying to hear about the Kellys' ball. What are you going to wear, by the way?"

"My black satin—as I said before, I can't afford a new dress."

"My dear, why didn't you tell me? I'd gladly have lent you the money."

"Well, the truth is, I thought I'd have managed it from my father—but that's impossible, and so——"

The old lady dived into her pocket and produced her purse. "My dear, you're more than welcome to this if it's any use to you. There's ten pounds, I think, and no hurry to pay it back—suit your own convenience as to that."

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed Miss Em delightedly. "You've forestalled a request for merely half this sum. I feel ashamed to be asking it, but——"

"Ah, don't I know all you've to put up with, Miss Em dear? You needn't think you're under any compliment to such an old friend as myself. So just make yourself happy, and say no more about it."

If Miss Em did say "no more about it" it was from no want of feeling. She was genuinely grateful, and the relief of being "well in funds" for her forthcoming journey was so intense that her heart glowed with good-will to all the world.

Perhaps, like Thackeray's famous heroine, Miss Em felt at times that she could have been an embodiment of feminine virtue on a thousand a year. It was only the perversity of circumstances that had warped her nature, and spoilt much that was excellent in it.

Love, generosity, and self-sacrifice were all possible to her, even a certain amount of truthfulness and candour; but, as she was wont to say in moments of expansive confidence, the two latter virtues were only permissible to rich and independent folk. Yet as she went home now, after an affectionate farewell to the kind-hearted doctor's wife, she felt that little uncomfortable prick of conscience which is so lowering to one's self-esteem, and so apt to spoil the content of success.

There was a time when she would only have laughed at the manœuvres and schemes of the past week; now the momentary triumph evaporated so quickly that the odd and unusual sense of weariness almost frightened her.

Was she growing old, really old? She thought of the face that looked at her sometimes, lined and haggard in its sad truthfulness; she remembered the actual years that claimed her, despite the possible youthfulness that she at times achieved.

A week hence in the brilliance of the Dublin season, or lured by the excitement of the gaming-table, she would be Peg, the Rake once more; but in this chill wintry gloom it was only a very weary and heart-sick woman who passed up the village street, the ghost of a brighter and fairer self, whose feet had once tripped along those self-same stones.

As she reached the gates of Carrig-duve she paused and looked back at the dark and silent road stretching away into vague shadow. The sky, holding still a faint gleam of the departing twilight, seemed to drop over the distant hills, till suddenly the dusk rose up to meet it and shut it out from sight.

That solitary figure passed through the gates and walked swiftly down the leafless avenue.

"What fools we women are!" she thought with momentary bitterness; "we want and fear a thing at the same time. I've been dreading a meeting and resolving to avoid it. Now that Fate has put it out of my power, I begin to regret. I can't even hear anything. Why he is here? What the years have done for him? But perhaps it is best I should not; that page was closed for ever long ago! It would be worse than folly to re-open it."

A faint wind ran like a shiver through the boughs. She looked up and saw the pale gleam of the new moon in the misty clouds. Some swift fancy of childhood flashed back and linked it with a wish to be granted.

But the wish took so long to frame that the little frail sickle of light had been hurried back into the darkness before the thought had formulated desire into outward expression.

CHAPTER XI

EN ROUTE

THE express was waiting, but it still wanted five minutes of the starting-time when the Carrig-duve wagonette deposited Miss Em and her trunk and travelling-bag at the station. The shabby porter, to whose official mind she was endeared by the memory of many "tips," at once hastened to relieve her of any responsibility concerning luggage.

"The gentlemen are waitin' on the platform, miss," he said, touching his cap; "and I was to say they'd taken the tickets and engaged a carriage."

The becoming flush on Miss Em's cheek deepened ever so little, but she only nodded; and slipping a half-crown into the man's hand, passed on.

There were several people standing about on the platform. Her quick eye at once distinguished Paddy and his friend; but she gave a little start of surprise as she saw they were talking to the Barrington girls and their cousin.

"Gracious! I do hope *they're* not coming," she thought, as she advanced to the group and exchanged cordial greetings.

The sharp feminine eyes took in every detail of her appearance, from the altered style of hair-dressing to the neat and irreproachable *chaussure*.

To the male mind Miss Em simply appeared "well got up," and inspired that feeling of satisfaction which is connected with suitability of costume to occasion—a matter of more importance than many women think.

"Dear me, how are you all?" she cried genially. "Going to Dublin also, Miss Barrington?"

"No," answered Laura frankly; "I wish we were."

"We merely drove our cousin over," interposed the elder sister stiffly; "he is summoned to Dublin on business for a few days."

"Oh," said Miss Em, with one of her gracious smiles, "that is an unexpected pleasure. Perhaps you will be at this famous ball after all, Mr. Barrington?"

"He does not know the Kellys," answered Minnie sharply.

"No?" queried Miss Em, with a flash of her eyes at the young man's good-looking face. "Oh, but that could soon be remedied among us all, eh, Paddy? Why, we shall be quite a party going up. I hear you have engaged a carriage," she added, turning to Captain Kearney.

"Yes, that one opposite"—he glanced at his watch—"only two minutes, Miss Em; we'd better be taking our seats."

She walked on at once. Major Raikes, whom she knew very slightly,

having charged himself with her travelling-bag (in which were the diamonds), and Paddy Kearney and young Phil Barrington following.

The sight was gall and wormwood to the two girls. If they could have found fault with her appearance it would have been some satisfaction; but Miss Em looked only a stylish, handsome, and well-dressed woman of thirty or thereabouts, and as such the three men accepted her.

"It's perfectly disgusting the way she goes on!" exclaimed Minnie Barrington savagely, as the train steamed out of the station; Miss Em gracious in smiles, and cordially waving her hand from the carriage window. "I can't imagine what the men can see in her."

"Nor I," agreed Laura; "an old thing of forty! Not that she looks it though," she added with grudging frankness. "And if it's 'make up' it's uncommonly well done. Did you notice her hair?"

"Of course; but I wasn't going to say so, I wonder if that's the new fashion?"

"You may be sure it is, and that she's got it for this ball. I almost wish we were going, Minnie."

"So do I, now; though they are snobs. I wonder if it's true they've managed to hook the Lord Lieutenant."

"If they have you may be sure that old 'standard medlar' will get hold of him and keep him beside her all the evening; she is without doubt the most audacious woman I ever met."

"But they are very good people to know, you know," said her sister; "they come next the Lustrells, in spite of financial eclipse."

"Poor as church mice, and as mean as Jews," snapped the fair Minnie savagely; "I simply detest them. The father is a fool, the second wife a miser, and Miss O'Hara herself an impudent adventuress!"

* * * * *

"Some one's talking badly of me," laughed Miss Em, as the train sped along and one by one the familiar landmarks were passed.

She touched one small glowing ear as if to emphasise her words.

"I can give a pretty good guess who it is," said Paddy significantly.

"Surely Miss O'Hara can have no enemies," observed Major Raikes with an admiring glance.

"Indeed, but she has," Miss Em answered for herself, "and plenty of them!"

"Beauty and popularity must always arouse a certain amount of envy," said young Barrington gallantly.

"Well, as to the first," confessed Miss Em frankly, "I've had my day, and I can't complain. I'm willing enough to let every one have theirs, and I tell them so; but somehow," she added reflectively, "straightforward courses don't seem to take with women. If you tell them the truth they either suspect a motive, or don't believe you."

"I often wonder," said Major Raikes, "whether women ever tell us the truth about themselves. If it's unflattering we *can't* believe it, and if the reverse we think they—*don't*."

"You mustn't judge individuals by generalities," said Miss Em, "or the whole sex by a chance sample. I can tell you this though,—when young we are men's hardest critics, and seldom grateful for their worship. It is only pain that makes youth merciful, or moulds it into shape."

"That sounds a little cruel," said Paddy, thinking doubtless of Molly Lustrell's lovely face.

"I've no doubt it does ; truth is seldom pleasant to hear."

"You mean to say, then, that a woman thinks more of a man who treats her badly, than of one who treats her well."

"I was speaking of girls," said Miss Em, with an odd smile. "Surfeit them with love and flattery and admiration, and what do you gain? Indifference, and possibly contempt. Let them feel that you can do without them, that at all events you can master yourself, and, if need be, them, and they are ready to adore you at once."

"Your words are golden, Miss O'Hara ; I shall lay them to heart," said Major Raikes. "How you must have studied your sex !"

"Or—ours," said Paddy Kearney.

"Oh, you are all repetitions, and pipe to the same tune," said Miss Em sharply. "What woman gets rational treatment at your hands? She is an angel before you win her, and something—very different—afterwards! We say Irishmen make the best lovers ; but our praise does not extend further, except in a few rare instances."

"I'm sorry you've such a poor opinion of your countrymen," said Major Raikes, who was an enthusiastic admirer of the "sex" and an arrant flirt. "Do you think Englishmen are more constant or more virtuous?"

"Well, to tell you the truth I do," said Miss Em gravely. "They have less personal charm but more solid virtues than Irishmen—safer and more reliable, I should pronounce them. Truer in feeling, if less flattering in expression. An Irishman carries you off your feet, so to speak ; his passion rages like a summer storm ; you are at once amazed at his audacity and flattered by his recklessness, yet you have an instinctive fear that the storm will pass quickly, and the recklessness turn to repentance."

"You are a severe critic, Miss O'Hara."

"Perhaps I've need to be. We can afford to criticise what we have never possessed."

"Some man's loss, and your own cruelty spoke there, Miss Em," said Paddy Kearney audaciously.

She laughed. "Perhaps so ; but no lost heaven visits my dreams, Paddy. I've seen too many prospective paradises turned into gardens of desolation to believe that the gates ever really open."

"To *think* they do is surely some consolation though," said young Barrington shyly.

"Oh, all illusions are pleasant. They are the flowers among the weeds of life, only the pity is the weeds will grow apace and choke them out. Talking of weeds though" (and she laughed merrily), "if any of you gentlemen would like to indulge in one at the present time I haven't the least objection."

"What a damned sensible woman !" thought Major Raikes. "I really must cultivate her acquaintance. I wonder if she has any money?"

Cigars were produced by Paddy and himself—young Barrington did not smoke.

"What consolations you men have !" observed Miss Em presently—she had grown tired of looking out of the window at a landscape known by heart. "To swear or to smoke must be *such* a relief in certain conditions of mind."

"You're right there," said Paddy. "'A big swear' is an immense relief to the feelings, though it sounds bad to say so. Doesn't some writer call profanity 'the safety-valve of human nature'?"

"All our passions are pagan," remarked the major. "The heirlooms of a remote ancestry. I often think there is an innate savageness in us that no civilisation will ever stamp out."

"It has been tried pretty often," said Miss Em, "but the results don't appear promising."

She looked out on the bare bleak roads, the starved-looking ragged children, the wretched cabins and neglected fields, as if to emphasise her words. The three men followed her glance, and plunged into politics. The state of Ireland, the faults of a Government that neither could, would, nor should rule her. The short-sightedness of patriots, and the illogical obstinacy of the lower classes. How well Miss Em knew it all! How often she had heard the subject discussed, and how hopeless seemed any attempts to restore order, or bring about prosperity or content!

"I'm not in any way prejudiced myself," she said; "but I cannot, with any degree of truth, uphold the monstrous arguments that the country sets up for independent government. A race so passionate, obstinate, and bombastical could no more govern themselves than a pack of schoolboys."

"That's fearfully true," agreed the major. "Enthusiasts are seldom logical, and our representatives seem to lose their heads entirely once they begin to talk. I must say I never feel so ashamed of my countrymen as when I read an Irish speech in the House of Commons. The way that facts are misrepresented is only surpassed by the effrontery that represents them."

"You know what Kingsley says of us?" said Miss Em; "that we are 'liars ingrain,' we can neither be trusted, nor trust each other. How can you expect justice in a country where no man's word is to be depended on, and the name of an oath is ridiculed by the very priests, who proclaim it is no wrong to break faith with a heretic?"

"That's quite true," said Paddy eagerly. "Nine out of ten wouldn't stick at a lie if it served a purpose. I don't wonder Kingsley called us a 'nation of liars.'"

"Yet there was a simplicity and grandeur about the 'good old Irish gentlemen,'" said the major thoughtfully. "I remember my grandfather used to say that if we told more fibs than our cold-blooded neighbours across the Channel, we also believed more. Certainly for generosity and open-handedness few men could beat him."

"The present race of 'landed gentry' are less inclined to laud those virtues than they used to be," remarked Paddy. "Generosity and open-handedness in one's ancestors have left but sorry legacies for their descendants. The country gets poorer and more wretched with every generation. All the finest properties are going to rack and ruin. The owners won't live here at all, and small blame to them when they can't get their rents, and go in fear of their lives even for asking for them."

"Do you think we should be any better off if we made our own laws?" asked Miss Em of the major.

"Indeed, no; worse I should say. A century ago we had three hundred resident peers, a House of Commons, and a mayor and corporation in Dublin; yet the capital was a disgrace to civilisation, the country steeped in poverty and misery of every description, and the peasants as savage and brutal as the Russians of Warsaw. The streets of Dublin and Cork were so dangerous that no woman, and indeed very few men, could walk in them after nightfall, and even carriages were scarcely safe from

molestation on their way to or from an entertainment. The newspapers of the time are full of accounts of ruffianism and lawlessness. It was a case of a ruined, half-civilised nobility ruling, or trying to rule, a half-savage population; and a national Government would only throw things back into the same disgraceful condition."

"I believe you're right, Raikes," said Paddy Kearney, who had listened thoughtfully to this harangue. "The truth is the Irish don't know what is best for them, or what they really want. What they would like is probably an individual income, and perfect independence for every one. But I'm afraid no Government, even a national one, could safely give them that." There was a general laugh.

"A millennial Ireland, in fact," said Miss Em, "with the pope and the queen standing side by side saying, 'Bless you, my children,' and the nation at large singing the 'Wearing of the Green' and the National Anthem in alternate verses! Mr. Gladstone will bring all that about some day."

"Mr. Gladstone doesn't know much of the realities of Irish life," said Paddy Kearney. "No one can who doesn't live in the country—and then if he doesn't adopt the *laissez faire* system and let everything take its own course and every one do exactly as he pleases, he'll become unpopular. To attempt any reform is to wage war against a host of prejudices, religious and traditional, and to contend with difficulties that are simply overwhelming."

"It is a matter of extreme difficulty for any English person to get at the real *facts* concerning your country," said young Barrington. "We get a general impression of dislike and discontent, of grievances real and imaginary, of factions and contentions at once opposing and opposed; but what you really want, or would consider universally beneficial, it is impossible to discover."

"Probably for the reason we don't know it ourselves," said Miss Em. "Erin is true to her sex in that peculiarity, and the poetic turbulence of her character."

"It seems a pity she can't get along like other countries. And really she is her own worst enemy. She has discouraged every attempt at benefit, and exiled the wealthiest and noblest of her landed proprietors. No Irish landlord cares to live on his own estates any longer!"

"No wonder either!" said Paddy Kearney; "it is all very fine to blame absentees but, faith, 'tis a matter not only of convenience, but of personal safety with most of them. My uncle perfectly hates Ireland, but he's forced to live there now on account of the property, such as it is."

"He should sell it to an English family like the Markhams of River's Court," said Miss Em sarcastically; "they would restore its ancient splendour."

"I hear the Kellys are looking out for a property," remarked Major Raikes. "Their Dublin mansion is not sufficient."

"We all meet there to-morrow night, don't we?" said Miss Em.

"I'm afraid I cannot hope for that privilege," said Charlie Barrington.

"I'll take you if you like," said Paddy good-naturedly; "I've *carte blanche* to bring my friends."

"And I'll give you a waltz," laughed Miss Em.

"That's no small favour, let me assure you," said Major Raikes. "Miss O'Hara's dancing is divine, as I've had the pleasure of experiencing. May I beg to be equally honoured?" he continued.

"Certainly, if you can remember to claim the promise in time," she answered gaily.

"And where are you staying in Dublin?"

"At the Gresham at first, with Lady Patricia Moira. You know her, do you not?"

"Oh! very well indeed," he answered gaily. "She is charming, and her house is one of the few where one gets real enjoyment."

"She is not entertaining this season, I believe," said Miss Em; "she talks of going abroad."

"And I suppose you'll accompany her?" suggested Paddy Kearney.

"A consummation devoutly to be wished," thought Miss Em. But aloud she only said diplomatically: "It is not—impossible, Paddy."

CHAPTER XII

OPENING THE CAMPAIGN

Miss Em's heart glowed with a feeling of satisfaction as the fly bore her along through Sackville Street and finally deposited her at the Gresham Hotel.

"How one enjoys streets and shops after being buried in the country!" she thought, as she stood in the brilliantly lit portal and looked out at the bustle and crowd. Then having seen her luggage brought in, and paid the flyman, she walked into the entrance hall.

"Why—Anne!" she exclaimed delightedly, as a stately personage in black silk and neat cap met her at the foot of the staircase. "How well you're looking! How is Lady Patricia? You see I've arrived all safe."

"My lady is quite well, thank you, Miss O'Hara; she regretted she had to go out; but perhaps you won't be sorry to rest after your journey? If you will kindly follow me I will show you your room. Allow me to take your bag."

"The same dear, prim old thing!" thought Miss Em, as she delivered up the precious travelling-bag with some reluctance. It had never been out of her sight for a single moment since she left Carrig-duve. She followed the black skirt and stately figure, and was presently ushered into a cosy bedroom, where a bright fire was burning, and a *solitaire* tea-set, arranged on a small table, gave an eloquent, if silent, promise of further comfort.

Miss Em sank into the depths of a big chintz-covered easy-chair, and drew off her gloves with a sigh of content. Anne relieved her of hat and cloak in the deft delightful manner of a superior lady's maid, and then rang for the tea, which was immediately brought.

"Shall I pour it out, miss, or will you?" asked Anne respectfully.

"Oh, you do it," answered Miss Em, bending towards the cheery blaze to warm her hands. "And don't run away, Anne; it's such an age since I've seen you. Ah, there's my box," she added, as the porter appeared and deposited her trunk. "You'll find what I require for this evening just on the top."

She handed over her keys and then gave herself up to lazy enjoyment of her tea, while Anne busied herself over unpacking and arranging various garments.

She had a great regard for Miss Em, and a great belief that she would one day "achieve greatness" in some form or other, probably matrimonial. The sight of feminine frippery will make even the most

frozen female heart unbend and become gracious. Anne's manner gradually lost its stateliness, and her tongue unloosened itself.

"You have not forgotten the ball to-morrow night, Miss O'Hara?" she asked anxiously, as no very festive attire revealed itself to her gaze among the dresses, cloaks, and underwear which she spread out on the bed previous to arranging in the drawers and wardrobes.

"I should think not," laughed Miss Em, watching her with lazy content. (It was so delightful to have these things done for you instead of having to do them yourself.)

"Are you wondering about my dress?" she asked presently. "That's it."

The stately Anne looked with dignified amazement at the half-unpicked bodice which she had just lifted out of the tray. "I began to alter it," continued Miss Em, "but I came to the conclusion I had better leave it alone till I got here. It doesn't look very promising, does it?" And she broke into a peal of unconstrained laughter at the expression of Anne's face.

"That's so like you, Miss O'Hara," said the lady's maid, permitting herself the liberty of a smile. "I suppose you mean to get a ready-made dress at Madame Celestine's, as you did before."

"Indeed, but I don't," said Miss Em quickly. "She palms off her misfits or returned orders on me, and I'm not going to stand it any longer. Seriously, Anne, that black satin will have to do. I'm going to borrow some of Lady Patricia's lace, and you'll see I shall look magnificent."

"I must say I never *did* see a lady set off clothes as you do, Miss O'Hara," remarked Anne, as she unfolded and shook out the black satin skirt; "but there's a good deal of work to be done to this bodice before to-morrow night, though I'll gladly do all in my power to get it ready."

"Thank you, Anne," said Miss Em gratefully. "But Lady Patricia told me she had found out some dressmaker here who wasn't above doing alterations, and if she can manage to fix this together by to-morrow night I needn't trouble you."

"It's never anything but a pleasure to do things for you, Miss O'Hara," was the gracious response; "though I won't deny I'm busy over my lady's dress at present; still, if Mrs. Mahony can't promise this in time I'll manage it."

"You're a treasure, Anne," said Miss Em rapturously. "I feel quite safe when you're within call. What is your mistress going to wear?" she added suddenly.

"Green velvet and jet, and her topaz ornaments, miss. It's a Paris gown. I don't think you've ever seen it."

"It sounds delicious," said Miss Em; "but, dear me, the time is slipping away and I've a letter to write before I dress. Are there many people here, Anne?"

"Yes, miss; the hotel's nearly full. This ball has brought a great many, but they dress very quiet for *table d'hôte*. My lady generally wears black; what shall I put out for you?" she continued, as she brought forward the writing-case and removed the tea-tray.

"There's not much choice," said Miss Em lightly; "so I'll leave it to you, Anne."

She busied herself for a few moments with her letter, which was simply an announcement of her safe arrival to her stepmother.

Miss Em never omitted this formality, though she was perfectly aware it received little, if any, encouragement. She closed the envelope with a sigh of relief, and directed Anne to see to its postage. Scarcely had she done this when a knock at the door announced a visitor, and a handsome white-haired woman entered the room.

This was Lady Patricia Moira, mostly known as Lady Pat to her large and miscellaneous circle of friends, *intimes*, and society in general. She was a *mondaine* to her finger-tips, accomplished, wealthy, and tolerably sincere; loving popularity above all things, and inclined to sacrifice a great deal to obtain or retain it.

Her greeting to Miss Em was very cordial. Indeed, if the truth be told, she had no greater favourite than this erratic and brilliant god-daughter, who had startled her by mad escapades in youth, and was a source of constant marvel to her in "years of discretion."

"Have you had tea? Has Anne made you comfortable?" asked Lady Pat, as she kissed her with warm affection.

Miss Em assured her on both points; and they stood by the fire chatting on various matters till Anne had finished her task of arranging and hanging, and put out what she considered suitable "evening wear" for the *table d'hôte*.

Then she retired to wait for her mistress, who was giving Miss Em a rapid sketch of her doings in Dublin, and of the engagements she had made for them both.

"But the topic of the day is the Kellys' ball," she said in conclusion; "I wouldn't have had you miss it for the world. I'm sure you'll say you haven't been so amused for a long time. What about your dress by the bye?" she added, somewhat anxiously.

Miss Em laughed. "Well, Anne doesn't think much of it at present; but I'm coming out resplendent in the O'Hara diamonds, and they'll atone for a multitude of sins in the way of costume."

"Have you brought them? I'm so glad. There's a stability and satisfaction about good old family jewels that inspire and give confidence. If time wasn't so short, I was going to offer——"

"Yes, I felt sure I could depend on you; but there'll be such a crush, I hear, that a new dress would be quite thrown away. I'm going in for 'general effect.' It's safe and it doesn't excite envy or comment."

"We can leave splendour to the hostess," laughed Lady Pat. "I suppose she'll wear her presentation dress. Purple velvet train over amethyst satin, my dear; a tower of feathers, and ornaments, sapphires and diamonds."

"Sapphires! What! with such a coloured gown?"

"Yes," nodded Lady Pat; "she's never happy unless she empties the contents of her jewel-case over her abundant person. Isn't it a mercy, Emilia, that I've never grown *fat*."

"I doubt if even that could spoil *you*," said Miss Em, with an admiring glance. "You have such a way of carrying yourself."

"Tut, tut," said Lady Pat graciously; "no flattery, my dear, though that reminds me you're looking very well. You've altered your style of hair-dressing, I see."

"Yes, I was practising for the benefit of the ball. What do you think of the result?"

"A decided improvement; but there, I must run off and dress. The

table d'hôte is at seven sharp. You'll be ready? I know what an unpunctual creature you are."

"I'll do my best," said Miss Em. "Anne has saved me a good deal of trouble."

"I'll send her in for the 'finishing touches,'" said Lady Pat, and nodding gaily she left the room.

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Miss Em and her godmother were only five minutes late, and the soup was still going its round as they took their seats at a reserved table in the large dining-room. Before the first course was over, Miss Em's quick eyes had forcussed the noteworthy points and persons in the large assemblage, and her tongue gave satirical sketches of such peculiarities as struck her power of observation.

She was at her best at such times, at least in the opinion of Lady Pat, who hated dulness, and liked nothing better than the swift summary of looks, manners, and apparel, which set all these living puppets dancing before her, and spared her eye-glass all trouble during the progress of gastronomy.

Suddenly Miss Em started. "Why, here come the Lustrells!" she exclaimed, as a man, long past middle age, with a delicate peevish-looking face, and small keen eyes advanced slowly up the room. He was accompanied by two ladies, and as their arrival seemed unexpected there was a little confusion as regard to places.

Miss Em's eyes interrogated Lady Pat, and received an affirmative response. She gave a whispered order to the waiter, and he hurried off to pilot the new arrivals to their table.

"There's plenty of room here," said Lady Pat graciously; "and you are very welcome, Sir Jasper, if you like to join us. When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday, but we went to Bray to-day to see some friends," said the old baronet, as they all shook hands. "I told them here we should not be back to dinner, but we caught our train and managed it. This is quite an unexpected pleasure, Miss O'Hara."

"I agree with you," said Miss Em, with one of her flashing glances. "Why, it is ages since we met, Sir Jasper."

"You are such a runaway. Why, even this Christmas visit of yours has lasted barely long enough for any one to know you were at home," said he graciously.

"It would have been longer but for this great festivity which seems bringing us all to Dublin," said Miss Em. "Molly is going, of course?"

"Molly? oh yes, I've promised her a month of gaieties, and she won't let me off."

His tone was not affable, and his expression one of supreme discontent. Indeed, Sir Jasper Lustrell was not remarkable for any special virtue or amiability, and his outward courtesy was merely the thin veneer of a very cold and selfish nature. His sister, a pinched, hook-nosed person, with iron-grey hair severely banded, and a figure as stiff as the proverbial back-board, resembled him in point of selfishness, and added to that characteristic a sordid and narrow habit of mind that gave scant promise of an agreeable old age. Miss Em and herself had never been very friendly towards one another; and even under present amenities there was a good deal of acidity underlying the politeness they preserved in speaking. Molly was generally very quiet and subdued in the presence of her aunt,

who argued that the young generation of the present day were of a forward and independent nature, and required rigorous "keeping under."

The progress of dinner, and the satisfactoriness of the *menu*, appeared to have an agreeable effect upon Sir Jasper. He smiled at Miss Em's brilliant sallies, and unbent quite graciously to her badinage, while Lady Pat and Miss Lustrell exchanged cut-and-dried phrases respecting the country, the weather, and other popular subjects.

With the dessert, and the excellent bottle of Burgundy that he reserved for his own delectation, Sir Jasper allowed himself to be drawn into a wider communicativeness respecting plans and intentions. Miss Em speedily discovered that he had nothing in view for that evening, and a telegraphic glance to Lady Pat said as plainly as words—"Whist?"

The quick response that suggested an adjournment to that lady's sitting-room for a "quiet rubber" just hit the baronet's humour, though it afforded no very lively prospect to Molly, who not only was the "odd man out" of the occasion, but hated cards with all her heart.

"I declare," thought Lady Pat as they left the dining-room, "it might come to something. I wonder if she has given it a thought? I should like to see her well married after all, and this would be a most suitable match. Shall I give her a hint, or leave things to themselves?"

Her glance rested reflectively on Miss Em. Rarely had she looked better or her years less self-betraying than on this evening. Lady Pat resolved to leave things alone unless Miss Em alluded to the subject. She was not a very easy person to deal with, and had broken off two or three very promising "affairs" in a sudden fit of temper or caprice.

It was very disappointing. Lady Pat had *felt* it to be so, and not scrupled to say it. To "marry well" was a duty every woman owed to herself, especially if she possessed birth and beauty.

She herself, the youngest daughter of an impoverished peer, had made a wealthy marriage at seventeen and never regretted it, despite an entire absence of sentiment on her own part. But then Lady Pat possessed one of those happily constituted natures that can make its own ambitions or its own successes of sufficient interest to engross a lifetime.

She adored society, and it adored her. She had travelled much, read much, and studied all grades and conditions of men, women, and morals. At sixty years of age she was still far from being weary of life, and kept herself in touch with every social and political event of the day. Wit and genius found a ready admission to her *salons*. Dulness she considered the greatest fault in man or woman. The French and the Irish, she was wont to declare, were the only two nations who had any *esprit* left, and were entertaining enough to be entertained.

She did not particularly care for the Lustrells, but having nothing to do this evening she was quite willing to give in to Miss Em's evident desire for cards. The suggestion had been what Miss Em termed one of her "lucky shots"; for Sir Jasper was an appreciative whist-player as well as a good one, and the fact of having so satisfactory a partner put him into a most genial frame of mind.

With the advance of years he had become intensely critical with regard to women. He acknowledged to himself for a long time he had not met with such agreeable companions as on this evening; though he had known Miss Em for years the acquaintance had never ripened into intimacy, and he had formed no decided opinion about her. But a woman

who was of that satisfactory age when vanity and frivolity have passed into the background, who was moreover a good talker, and an excellent cardplayer, was decidedly a woman to be cultivated; and his compliments assumed a deferential as well as flattering tendency that made his sister's expression grow more acidulated, and caused Lady Pat to interrogate Miss Em's grey eyes with considerable curiosity. Molly noticed nothing, only sat by the fire with a thrilling three-volume novel in her hand, and wondered whatever people could find in cards to interest them!

Lady Pat lost games and money with the utmost serenity. The events of the evening being altogether unexpected, and yet ominous with future results, were quite sufficient to interest her; and while losing trick after trick she was mentally calculating the worth of a trump card held by Sir Jasper, and representing no less important a place than Castle Lustrell itself.

"He has been a widower a long time, and he's arrived at a time of life when marrying and repenting are all that are left for a man with his reputation," she thought. "It would suit admirably if Emilia would only look at it in a reasonable frame of mind. But one never knows how far to trust her, or when she will break out into one of her mad freaks; she is such a perfect O'Hara in that respect."

The "perfect O'Hara" was just then indulging in one of her reckless confessions. "Love cards, Sir Jasper? I should think I did; I'd play all day and all night if I had the chance."

"My dear Em!" and Lady Pat's foot gave a warning touch under the table. "That's a burst of Irish enthusiasm, Sir Jasper. Why, sometimes she won't touch a card from month's end to month's end."

"Because I know it's dangerous," said Miss Em. "When the stakes are material I'm afraid to trust myself. Don't I possess an ancestress who staked *herself* to a man she hated; yes, and lost and was obliged to marry him? And look at Aunt Bedelia, why,——"

"Oh, dear me! she'll spoil everything," thought Lady Pat distressfully.

"Miss Bedelia O'Hara?" questioned Sir Jasper suavely. "Oh, a delightful old lady! I enjoy her society immensely. She knows every one and everything, and is the most charming company possible."

"Has she ever asked you to dinner?" inquired Miss Em, with a sly glance. "If so, and you have gone through the martyrdom of tasting one of her 'surprises,' I marvel you have so good an opinion of her."

"She has asked me several times," he answered drily, "but I have never been able to accept the invitation."

"Well, don't—if you are wise," laughed Miss Em. "She has one little weakness, as all her friends know to their cost. She always invents one special dish of her own as the *pièce de résistance*, and each guest is bound to taste it. Never by any chance has it turned out as it was expected to do, and ought to have done; but the dear old soul goes on inventing and concocting with what she imagines to be the inventive genius of a Francatelli."

"It is extraordinary how few dinner-parties are successful," put in Lady Pat. "People either invite too large a party to be social, or too small a one to assimilate agreeably. There are few forms of entertainment that require so much thinking out, and as a rule get so little. Don't you agree with me, Miss Lustrell?"

Miss Lustrell did so with an undiminished acerbity of demeanour that

did not give an impression of her own successes in that line; but Lady Pat was only desirous of turning the conversation from the dangerous topic of "gambling." Miss Bedelia O'Hara was noted for her propensities, and she considered it a most ill-advised proceeding on Miss Em's part to allude to kindred tastes.

This was the sort of undiplomatic conduct which had ruined so many of her best chances, and now left her stranded on the very borders of "old maidism." It was one thing to play an admirable game of whist—men of Sir Jasper's age and standing would regard that as a desirable accomplishment—but gambling in that reckless, mutinous fashion which Miss Em indulged in when what she termed the "fit was on her,"—that was altogether a different matter, something to be kept in the background, not advertised unblushingly.

Miss Em was quick enough at taking hints when it suited her, and some curious form of mental telepathy assured her of what was passing in Lady Pat's mind, and for a few moments kept her on a debatable ground of "pros and cons."

Was it possible? . . . Could Sir Jasper be brought to think seriously of a second marriage, . . . and of herself as the future Lady Lustrell? It was a consideration not to be lightly dismissed, an ambition worthy even of the last of the O'Haras. Position, wealth, freedom, prospective triumph over many foes, each and all of these seemed to lurk in the admiration of those cold blue eyes, the courteous compliments of those thin satirical lips. Sir Jasper was not popular. His selfishness was proverbial, and the records of his past anything but—unblemished. But for all that he would make a desirable husband to any woman, fortuneless, and neither young nor romantic enough to expect too much of her bargain.

Graver and more thoughtful grew Miss Em's face. Sir Jasper was intently watching the game. His fine straight brows were knitted, his mind absorbed by a stroke of *finesse* that would determine the result.

"Six—we only want the odd trick," and his eyes met those of his partner.

"It is mine!" said Miss Em with triumph, as she placed the queen of trumps on the green cloth.

CHAPTER XIII

"COME into my room and have a chat," said Lady Pat, after their guests had left. "It is quite early, and I'm sure you're not tired."

"Not in the least," agreed Miss Em, following her into the lofty well-appointed bedroom where the faithful Anne was seated at work on the much-discussed bodice, destined to emerge from its chrysalis condition on the following night.

Miss Em's eyes rested on it with wondering admiration. "You've lent me your lace, Lady Pat! How kind of you!" she exclaimed rapturously. "What do you think of it now—Anne?"

Anne was of opinion that it would do no discredit to the wearer, if a process known as "trying on" resulted in unanimous satisfaction.

"Black is such safe wear!" said Miss Em, yielding to the "process," and surveying her dazzling white shoulders and arms with pardonable pride.

"You keep your figure wonderfully, Emilia," remarked her godmother. "But be careful; you'll be ruined once you grow stout."

She put herself into Anne's hands to be made "comfortable" as she expressed it, and wrapped a warm loose dressing-gown about her before subsiding into the cosy padded chair by the fire.

Anne retired; but presently returning with a tray bearing two glasses of some fragrant steaming beverage, prepared from a special receipt of her mistress, and supposed to contain marvellous properties termed "nerve soothing." With her arched insteps on the fender-bar, and her lips ever and anon inclined towards the fragrant stimulant, Lady Pat unbent, and became a genial and altogether delightful companion.

The conversation, at first desultory and consisting of questions and answers, settled itself finally into a discussion, the germ of which appeared to be Sir Jasper's unwonted attentions of that evening.

"Why don't you think about the matter, my dear? it would be most suitable in every way," asked Lady Pat; "you would hold a splendid position, none better in the county, and what a triumph over your stepmother!"

"Yes, there are advantages," agreed Miss Em. "But he's such a selfish, cynical old thing, I'm afraid we should quarrel dreadfully. He'd want to rule, and a man of his age and with his experience is sure to be tyrannical."

"My dear child, you can't have everything. You've been going on for years exemplifying the fable of the 'crooked stick.' There may be worse crutches than Sir Jasper Lustrell."

"Sabina and I hate each other," said Miss Em.

"Well, you'll be mistress, and can easily get rid of her. I'm sure if you'll only take a little trouble, you will have Sir Jasper at your feet. There was no mistaking his looks to-night."

"Do you really think," asked Miss Em suddenly, "really and honestly, that it would be better for me to marry? I have reached that debatable ground when life seems to offer me even chances of content. In a way I'm my own mistress. It is true home is very uncomfortable, and money less procurable than I could desire; still—I shouldn't care to place my neck under the heel of a selfish old voluptuary like Sir Jasper."

"A woman," replied Lady Pat, "can always manage a man if she likes to give herself the trouble."

Miss Em shrugged her handsome shoulders with some impatience.

"That's no answer to my question. I've never believed in jumping at an offer simply as an exchange of condition. I've always looked with contempt at the curious readiness with which women will take any male creature for a husband. To me, it argues a want of self-respect."

"You err on the side of over-fastidiousness," said Lady Pat. "I really do think it would be better for you to marry. At present, your position lacks stability, and much that you do and have done is liable to misrepresentation. A brilliant marriage, and such a position as Sir Jasper can give you, are advantages you cannot afford to reject."

"It is just the 'advantages' I am afraid of. I don't know how he would bestow them, and I am not disposed to accept benevolence as a sort of stage-trapping that only reflects dignity on the giver."

"That foolish O'Hara pride!" remarked Lady Pat.

"You have often commended it, my dear godmother."

"If the question in point was of a *mésalliance*, I might do so again," answered Lady Pat. "But not for years have I met with so desirable

a chance for you, and I do really entreat you to consider the matter seriously."

A sudden hot flush swept over Miss Em's face. She sat quite still, curiously still indeed, as if all her will was concentrated on the effort to appear unmoved.

"I daresay he means nothing," she said at last. "He is not a marrying man, and I really fail to see what benefit he would gain."

"A handsome wife of unexceptionable birth, and a companion he would be capable of appreciating. Believe me, my dear, Sir Jasper is neither too old nor too cynical to be blind to your value. He knows you are sensible and well gifted; you have corresponding advantages to those he proffers, and need not consider yourself the only person benefited."

She sipped the contents of her glass with a satisfied air, and replaced it on the silver tray.

"Think it over," she repeated. "I have never advised you but for your good. Above all, if this chance should fall to your lot, consider what a triumph over Madame O'Hara the second! You would be the great lady of the county."

"That seems your main argument," laughed Miss Em. "Don't you think some triumphs exact a heavier price than they are worth? If I quarrel with Madame Skinflint, I can, at least, manage to beat a retreat; but if I adopt the yoke of matrimony, I shall have to wear it, whatever betides."

"Can't you take life easily—yet?" said Lady Pat, leaning back in her chair, and surveying her slender feet and satin slippers with cheerful approval. "To worry about real grievances is bad enough, but about *possible* ones is worse than foolish. The great art of content is to glide through life without attempting to scale its heights or pierce its depths. Tragedy brings wrinkles. The mystery of life and its general topsyturveydoms are things no amount of 'taking thought' can explain, or do away with. By the way, you said in your letter there was something you wished to consult me about."

("Ye gods! so I did," thought Miss Em. "Now come to my aid, powers of invention! What am I to say?")

"It can stand over for to-night, dear," she said with a suggested yawn. "It is not fair to keep you up discussing my poor little worries and troubles. You too had some suggestion to make to me, but perhaps both had better remain undiscussed till after the ball."

"I think you are right," agreed Lady Pat, "though a very few words would detail my plan, which was simply to ask you to go abroad with me for a couple of months. However," and she laughed gaily, "I should prefer to marry you to Sir Jasper, so we won't decide upon that point till we see how affairs promise."

She rose as she finished speaking, and Miss Em did the same.

"Sir Jasper is actually going to the ball, he told me. Now, when a man of his age does such a thing it argues there is a strong reason for it. My experience is a wide one, Emilia, and I am sure that after *to-morrow night* it will only rest with yourself to win, or lose him."

"Might he not be going for Molly's sake?" suggested Miss Em. "Paddy Kearney is to be there, and she will need a dragon of some sort."

"I hope," said Lady Pat severely, "that *you* will be prudent for once,

and not flirt with that young man in the reckless fashion you generally do. I warn you it will ruin your chance with Sir Jasper."

"Oh, a fig for Sir Jasper!" cried Miss Em recklessly. "I'll dance with Paddy all night if it pleases me. He's the best waltzer in Dublin, and a ball is a ball, you know."

"And what about a good chance of settling down and ending your reckless, roving, knock-about life?"

"I'm not sure I should be half so happy if I were what the lawyers term 'strictly tied up.'"

"Emilia, you are incorrigible; you even try my patience, and you must allow it is considerable."

"Dear Lady Pat," she said with sudden compunction, "you have been always far too good to me, and I know I'm not worth troubling your head about."

"We won't talk about *that*, Emilia; I only ask a little prudence and common-sense at your hands, and that you will consider this matter less flippantly than you have other offers. It is for your own good I speak, and I am sure you will be grateful to me one day for the advice."

"I am sure of that too," said Miss Em warmly, "and I'll promise to give the weighty matter my fullest consideration. All the same we are crediting Sir Jasper with intentions that may have no place at all in his mind."

Lady Pat nodded significantly. "My dear, I *know* men. He is thinking about you with the utmost seriousness. I wish you would follow his example."

"I have never been able to take myself *seriously* yet, Lady Pat. It would be a hopeless task to begin now."

"You know I didn't mean that, Emilia."

"As for Sir Jasper," laughed Miss Em, "he, I grant you, might be regarded as a solemn subject; but I've had enough of him for to-night. How pleased he looked when I got that 'odd trick,' didn't he? If he had known what was in my mind——" she paused, her face looked strangely white. "Enough, enough!" she cried suddenly with one of those rapid changes of manner that puzzled even those who knew her best. "Let us see what to-morrow will bring forth!"

"To-morrow!" echoed Lady Pat. "Ah, my dear, you always had faith in the future. To-morrow is like the veiled goddess of the Greeks. We may fancy a smile on her lips, but are all unconscious of the doom in her eyes."

* * * * *

Miss Em possessed even more than the average share of impulsiveness and variability of her sex. It seemed that whatever training life had given her, had not been sufficiently coercive to tame these rebellious instincts, even when expediency clamoured its loudest.

No one knew this better than herself, and yet the knowledge with all its practical lessons had been wasted again and again.

The probabilities were in favour of her usual recklessness on the night of the eventful ball, as, "armed for the fray" to use her own expression, she stood surveying two large bouquets which Anne had just brought her.

One bore the name of Major Raikes, the other that of Sir Jasper Lustrell.

Accompanying these was also a substantial parcel, which on being opened resolved itself into a Russia leather glove-box, filled with lavender

and pale grey gloves from the renowned Supple's emporium. Miss Em's eyes sparkled with delight as they fell on this acceptable *cadeaux*.

"The darling boy!" she exclaimed rapturously, as she drew pair after pair of the dainty articles from their silver papers. "How thoughtful and how much more sensible than flowers! *They* are all very well for girls like Molly, but I vote for use before sentiment now, in the way of presents."

She selected a lavender-hued pair which would go admirably with her toilette, and then gave her attention to the bouquets. Sir Jasper's did not please her taste at all. It was composed of red and white camellias, arranged with the stiffness inseparable from their nature. She threw it aside after regarding the "effect" in the long pier glass. Her own appearance was very satisfactory.

The simple flowing lines of black satin draped her tall well-shaped figure to advantage, the low-cut bodice relieved by exquisite lace, and starred with diamonds, framed her shapely shoulders and perfect bust in a manner that did infinite credit to Anne's skill. The necklace at her throat, and the spray glittering in her soft brown hair, still further enhanced her undoubted claim to good looks, and made her no mean rival to the youth and beauty she would soon encounter.

Whatever she owed to art, the delicate flush on her cheeks was supremely becoming, and her natural high spirits and love of excitement gave brilliance to the dark grey eyes, and expression to the mobile lips whose sensitive nerves could so readily exchange gravity for smiles.

"Certainly I haven't looked better any time in these last ten years," she thought, as she surveyed herself with critical scrutiny. "Those flowers of Major Raikes are just the very thing I wanted. What a lovely idea, the white and green, and the ribbons to match! They don't clash with anything, but I suppose——"

The supposition was cut short by the entrance of Lady Patricia, resplendent in emerald green velvet, her throat and bosom veiled in delicate lace, among whose folds sparkled the lustre of topaz and brilliant.

Miss Em surveyed her with rapture.

"You look like a beautiful old fairy!" she exclaimed. "I feel—extinguished."

"You have no need to do so," laughed her godmother; "but it is time for us to go, and I came to see if you were ready. How charming those flowers look! I've always heard Sir Jasper had good taste."

"These are not Sir Jasper's at all," answered Miss Em lugubriously; "I wish they were. It's so horrid to have to make one's choice. These odious camellias are what he sent. I really can't sacrifice myself to them."

"Who sent the others?" asked Lady Pat sharply.

"Major Raikes. You know him; he is delightful."

"Yes, but impecunious, and not a marrying man. I'm afraid you'll have to make the sacrifice, my dear. You need only *appear* with the camellias after all. They are easily lost or mislaid after the first dance."

Miss Em made a grimace. "Odious things! what could have made him choose them? As for *appearing* with them, why, that is exactly what I object to. No, my dear godmother, you mustn't ask me. I'll sit out some dances with him, or let him take me into supper, but wear these flowers I *won't*."

"That is so like you, Emilia," said Lady Pat in a tone of vexation;

"always spoiling some good chance by a whim. Can't you forego vanity for once, and learn the policy of expediency?"

"It isn't vanity, it is a question of taste," said Miss Em provokingly, as she placed the two bouquets side by side. "Besides," she added, as she threw the camellias on the dressing-table with a disdainful gesture, "it is very much better to let a man see you don't care too much for his attentions. Expediency is not always the best policy, Lady Pat, and there is a certain meanness about it that sets me in revolt."

"Well, well, you must do what you please," said Lady Pat diplomatically; "only it is an obvious slight to Sir Jasper to leave his flowers behind."

"I'll say they came too late."

"You may be sure he'll take pains to ascertain the fact, not a difficult one either, considering he is staying at the same hotel."

"Then I'll tell him the plain truth for once," exclaimed Miss Em, "and say they didn't suit my dress. It would be as refreshing for him to hear, as for me to speak it. It's wonderful how long we accept shams, but a day comes when we get sick of them. The acid of the lemon is an agreeable change after a surfeit of sugar."

"I should think Sir Jasper was rather a dangerous subject for an experiment of that nature," said Lady Pat, beginning to draw on her gloves, and giving a significant glance at the clock on the mantel-piece.

"And I'm engaged for the first waltz to Paddy Kearney! I had almost forgotten, and he after sending me all these delicious gloves, too!" cried Miss Em.

She snatched up her wraps, and taking the white and green bouquet in her hand, followed Lady Pat from the room, gaily humming a waltz.

CHAPTER XIV

"OF REVELRY BY NIGHT"

THE purple-clad dowager, whose nodding plumes graced her welcome to the "all sorts and conditions" of men and women crowding up her staircase, was quite unconscious of the amusement she created in Miss Em's mind, or the satirical comments of Lady Pat.

All the worry and expense, the heart-burnings and manœuvres, and fears and anxieties of the past fortnight were forgotten in the glory of the present triumph. Every titled name her footmen shouted gave Mrs. Kelly a thrill of ecstasy, while adding to the nervousness of the stout vulgar-looking man by her side, who fidgeted with his gloves, and mopped his brow from time to time with a handkerchief that, as Miss Em said, one *felt* ought to be of red cotton!

"Why is it that in any social function needing dress and display, women carry things off so much better than men?" she whispered to Lady Pat, as she watched their hostess delightedly.

"I can only put it down to the satisfaction we derive from dresses," answered Lady Pat. "A skirt from Worth or Elise will carry a woman triumphantly through any ordeal. It is a badge of superiority before which all the virtues may shrink abashed."

"It is a very delightful badge," said Miss Em, glancing at the gorgeous gowns and peacock-like trains that swept to and fro the brilliant ball-room mingling here and there with the simpler fabrics of muslin and tulle worn by *débutantes* and youthful belles.

"They've done it very well," said Lady Pat, raising her *lorgnette* to survey the masses of flowers banked and wreathed wherever the eye could rest, and filling the air with fragrance. "A little too much glare, perhaps; subdued lights are so much more becoming, especially when complexions are not quite safe."

Miss Em felt a little pang of uneasiness at the remark, which was not set at rest until a favouring mirror assured her it could not possibly have been meant for *her*.

That delicate touch of pink, that faint softening bloom of *veloutine* defied any stricture coarser than "improvement" when viewed beside the vulgar daubing, and eye-köhling, and ruby-reddened lips that the unsoftened light displayed in all directions. If she had needed further confirmation on the point she gained it in the flattering glance of her "trio," as she called them, who at this moment marched up to greet her and her chaperon, and claim various dances at her hand.

"Certainly three as fine-looking men as one would wish to see," thought Lady Pat. "I wonder how Emilia always manages to keep a staff of admirers about her, and such very creditable ones too!"

Her attention was called off at this moment by the entrance of the Lustrell party, who immediately attached themselves to her.

"Miss O'Hara? Oh, yes, there she is dancing with your nephew," she said in answer to Sir Jasper's inquiries; and then noting Charlie Barrington's admiring glance at Molly, she at once introduced them to each other, and sent them whirling off to the strains of the *Doctrinen* Waltz, while she and Sir Jasper seated themselves on a convenient and comfortable settee, that commanded a view of the ballroom.

"How beautifully Miss O'Hara dances!" remarked Sir Jasper, as Miss Em floated past on Paddy Kearney's arm.

"She does most things well," said Lady Pat quietly.

"Indeed, I am sure of that," he answered with ready acquiescence; "she is a most accomplished woman. I am sorry my dancing days are over," he added regretfully. "I fear I shall have but little opportunity of enjoying her society to-night."

A smile from grey eyes, a flash of white teeth, and Miss Em was swept away once more into the mazy circle.

Sir Jasper was conscious of something very like envy in his selfish heart as he watched her. He had come to this ball greatly against his inclinations, but had administered consolation to himself by reflecting that he would have a delightful and congenial companion for the greater part of the evening. But he had never anticipated handing over that companion to a host of younger rivals, or receiving at her hands so decided a hint that whatever Time had done for *him*, it had not as yet been cruel enough to "wither or stale *her* infinite variety."

For years Sir Jasper had not experienced so genuine an emotion as when she returned and greeted him with the light flow of badinage and good-humour that made even nonsense charming, though, as Lady Pat declared afterwards, it sent cold shivers down her back.

But Miss Em was in no mood for any stately pastoral; she wanted her shepherds to pipe and dance and share her own gaiety; and presently, when Major Raikes appeared on the scene, she gave full rein to her reckless spirits, and quite ignored the elderly valetudinarian by her side.

Sir Jasper's delicate peevish face began to show signs of dissatisfaction.

He had no sympathy with enjoyments from which he was excluded, and the programme he had sketched out for himself was entirely altered. Not all Lady Pat's tact and energy could soothe his ruffled plumes; and though his ill-humour was a tribute to her perspicacity it was also a source of annoyance.

"Really," she thought in vexation, "Emilia ought to have more sense than to play fast and loose with such a chance. All Major Raikes's attentions count for nothing; he can never marry her; but there—she was always the same."

However, she chatted on about a thousand trifles, her project for spending the rest of the winter abroad among them, and hinted at the probability of her god-daughter's accompanying her. She was keen enough to notice the interest he took in her plans, and her hopes kindled afresh.

The next time Miss Em joined them Sir Jasper asked permission to take her down to supper, and greatly to Lady Pat's relief she consented. Her motive was twofold, as she had promised to give Paddy Kearney an opportunity of a quiet talk with Molly, free from parental supervision. With her presence and acceptance of his offer Sir Jasper's ill-humour apparently vanished; and as Miss Em announced her intention of sitting out the set of quadrilles then in progress Lady Pat left them to their own devices and moved away to speak to some other friends.

"I am sorry to see my flowers did not please you," remarked the old baronet with a glance at the bouquet in her hand.

"Indeed, they pleased me very well," she answered readily, "but they did not suit my dress, so I arranged them for my own private gratification instead of bringing them to wither in these hot rooms. I think," and she glanced demurely at the pleased face, "I have really paid you the better compliment. These will have had the brief hour of use and be thrown aside; the others will live on to please sight—and memory—for many days to come."

"Then I am indeed honoured," murmured Sir Jasper, and he leaned back in his seat and listened with rapt attention to her gay chatter, her description of people, places, and things, and thought again what a charming companion she was, and what a suitable age she had reached for matrimony.

Miss Em took his compliments and tender looks less seriously than they deserved. She had had a surfeit of such things in her forty years, and the hap-hazard element in her nature made her more inclined to play bo-peep with destiny, than to accept its favours with the decorum of matured judgment.

That fastidiousness of which Lady Pat had accused her, made her shrink from the touch of the chill, blue-veined hand on her arm, seeing in its proffered caress only the tepid blood and loose, dry skin of age. It was just one of those curious prejudices which again and again had combated the wider prudence that bade her accept instead of criticising.

"He must be sixty at least," she thought; "and every year he will get more wrinkled, more selfish, more crotchety, and I should have to put up with it all."

They went down to supper, prepared and served on the same sumptuous scale as the whole entertainment. Sir Jasper confined his attentions to the champagne, which was excellent, and ate very sparingly; but Miss Em, whose digestion was as perfect as her health, distributed her favours

equally among oyster patties, lobster salad, quails in aspic, chicken *chaudfroid*, jellies and creams and such-like delicacies.

Her companion watched her and listened to her, and filled her glass with the sparkling liquid again and again.

"It is a long time," he remarked, "since I have enjoyed an evening so much. Your enthusiasms quite carry me away. Women are rarely honest enough to show their feelings."

"We are so often afraid of being misjudged," said Miss Em. "If we say we like society we are put down as frivolous; to appreciate a good glass of wine is to be accounted an inebriate; to play for more than ordinary stakes at cards stamps 'gambler' on our reputation and makes skill a vice. If we are hypocrites men make us so, believe me."

"I am sure *you* are not a hypocrite," he said, with a tender glance into the frank grey eyes. "Your face proclaims that."

She laughed. "I am like most of my sex," she said. "You know the saying that a woman has nothing to conceal, can have nothing in her life worth revealing. There is a great deal of truth in it."

"*Worth revealing!*" he repeated. "But that may apply to her nature, not her secrets."

"It may," agreed Miss Em, "but I hardly think it does. After all, wicked people are much more interesting than good ones. Life without evil in it would be a very tame affair. A level mediocrity, without excitement and without benefit. If every one was uniformly virtuous we should have no sinners to convert or patronise. Think of the sudden loss of employment to priests and philanthropists."

Sir Jasper smiled approvingly. Sentiments of this sort delighted him. His own past was not decked in very meritorious colours; and so easy-going a philosophy as "doing evil that good might come," or mental satisfaction be afforded to those whose duty it was to preach virtue, was just the philosophy he could best appreciate.

"To look on at excellence while erring yourself affords the charm of contrast," he murmured, sipping his wine with connoisseur-like approval, "and contrast is the salt and savour of life. Why are most of us here to-night, for instance? Nine out of ten came from curiosity, to see how money would perform what rank and birth could not accomplish. Good society wearies sometimes of its own perfections, and dives into a lower strata for mere relief."

"Does that feeling account for the very odd choice displayed in its *amours*?" asked Miss Em daringly. "One has read or heard of very strong contrasts *there*."

Sir Jasper's keen eyes looked coldly interrogative, then drooped, and hid an expression which was somewhat uneasy. There was a page in his life——

"I wonder how much she knows?" he thought, but aloud he only observed that no doubt society had displayed brief aberrations of intellect at times. Sentiment was always illogical. Youth, whether male or feminine, possessed very much the same nature; impressionable, passionate, impossible to guide, and only to be controlled by the bit and spur of Experience.

It was odd that as he spoke Miss Em's eyes flashed a kindred interrogation to that of which she had been the subject a moment before. But drooped lids are unrevealing, and the little smile hovering over the thin lips might have meant anything.

* * * * *

A zealous partner unearthed Miss Em at last, and brought that *tête-à-tête* to an abrupt conclusion.

Perhaps she was not sorry to end it, though Sir Jasper's regret bordered almost on ill-temper. What did she want to dance for? Surely she had exerted herself enough. That there could be satisfaction in a well-filled programme after twenty years of age did not occur to him.

But Miss Em loved dancing almost as well as card-playing, and did it with equal enthusiasm and perfection. It amused her to see the jealous glances of younger rivals, and to hear the meant-to-be-audible sneers of dowagers and less favoured contemporaries who had to play the part of wallflowers while she was still "in request."

The hours waned, the rooms thinned, the anxious hostess was thankfully imbibing refreshment at her own supper-table, and still the "O'Hara woman," as one or two spiteful friends called her, danced on, and still Sir Jasper Lustrell lingered, and Lady Pat wondered if he were serious, and whether Miss Em knew best how to treat him after all.

Some men had to be flattered, and some harassed, and some piqued into love. Evidently, Sir Jasper belonged to the latter class.

But at last Miss Em declared she had had enough of it, and ruthlessly declined to fulfil two or three remaining engagements. Molly was summoned, and Sir Jasper's face lost its look of peevish fatigue. With a sublime disregard of the etiquette of age, he left Lady Pat to a more juvenile escort, and gave his arm to Miss Em, whom Molly and Paddy Kearney were secretly blessing in the background.

"A most delightful evening; I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much," murmured the old baronet in his silkiest tones, bending courteously over Mrs. Kelly's ungloved and beringed hand.

"Charming—admirable—most enjoyable . . . trust you are not *very* fatigued," echoed the vanguard of the party as they followed suit.

"You are sure you are not tired?" inquired Sir Jasper tenderly, as he handed his companion into the waiting carriage, and stood there bare-headed and forgetful of cold and other inconveniences, the chill grey light on his face, and the wind ruffling his scanty white locks.

"Tired! not a bit of it," cried Miss Em gaily. "Shure, Sir Jasper, doesn't our dear Tom Moore (rest his soul!) tell us that the

Best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours from the night?

Many's the time you've done that, I'll be bound; and you're quite equal to doing it still!"

Sir Jasper sighed. "What delightful spirits you have! How much I am in your debt for this evening's enjoyment!"

"Well, don't catch cold and be laid up to-morrow," said Miss Em prudently. "Good-night, or rather good-morning. There's the dawn rebuking us, and giving hints of rheumatism and bronchitis."

She closed the window, nodded a last farewell, and threw herself back on the cushions with a sigh of relief.

"It is hard work," she said to Lady Pat; "*mais—l'affaire marche bien.*"

"It does indeed," answered her companion. "He seems quite fascinated. I think it only rests with yourself, Emilia."

"What about Molly?" asked Miss Em suddenly. "She may have

something to say about a prospective stepmother. That odious word!" and she shivered and drew her wraps more closely about her.

"But she is fond of you, and you are not of the dragon type. I think she would hail you as a relief after an experience of her Aunt Sabina."

Miss Em said nothing, only sat silently in her corner of the carriage gazing out at the grey dawn and the paling lights of the streets. The memory of the dance, and the music, and the scents of the flowers, were alike an oppressive burden.

How often she had shared in such scenes, and left them light of heart as any girl whose echoing laugh told of sheer enjoyment! Now, there was always an afterwards—more or less distasteful.

The "afterwards" in the present instance was the memory of that cold hand which had rested for a moment unrebuked upon her arm. She could not forget its touch, and even when she closed her eyes she was haunted by a vision of wrinkled flesh, bloodless and heavily veined—the touch of age with its selfish exactions and chill reminder of Time's cruelty. To yield to its clasp, to give up her vigorous healthy womanhood, her long-treasured independence of mind and action, filled her with unaccountable repugnance.

The laws of nature are sometimes stronger than the laws of man, and they were strong enough still within her breast to threaten revolt and set body and mind against a mere commercial alliance.

Her unusual quiet and restraint surprised Lady Pat, but she attributed them to natural reaction after the evening's excitement and the wild spirits she had displayed throughout. There was no possibility of Miss Em's ever hitting the *juste milieu* of mental balance. She was always in extremes.

They bade each other "good-night" without further confidences, and Lady Pat put herself into Anne's kindly care, while Miss Em closed her door with a sigh of relief. The fire was burning dully in the grate. The faint daylight shone in through one window where the blind had not been drawn. Mechanically she lit the candles, and began to unfasten the diamonds from her hair and dress. Her lips took a more scornful curve as she laid them down on the toilet-table.

"All the scheming and worry they cost," she thought; "and now it is all over, and I've gained—what? An old *roué's* approval, fanned a dying spark from fast cooling ashes! I who once craved love deep as the sea, and for that and *that* only would have given myself!"

A storm of contempt swept over her face. She seized the jewels and tossed them into the case and closed the lid with a fierce gesture. Some difficulty as the catch escaped the lock reminded her that she had been obliged to force it, and it was now useless.

She opened it again, and began to arrange the different ornaments more carefully, instead of leaving them heaped here and there upon the velvet tray. Still the lid would not close, and half impatient of the delay caused by its obstinacy she lifted out the tray in order to see if any obstruction came from below. A thick layer of cotton-wool covered the contents of the lower compartment. She lifted it up and saw to her surprise a variety of other ornaments. An old-fashioned hunting-watch, one or two massive gold bracelets, a pair of long "dropper" earrings, hideous enough in fashion and design to adorn some savage queen, a hair chain, a gigantic cameo brooch, and two or three other articles equally

antique and ugly revealed themselves, and for a moment she stared at them in utter bewilderment.

"Gracious! they must all belong to Mrs. O'Hara," she exclaimed aloud. "And if she misses them, won't there be a hue and cry! Not but what it serves her right for putting them into my case."

She went carefully through them again, then took the diamonds out of their tray, and placed them together in a heap.

"She must have her rubbish back, of course; but I'm—well, anything an O'Hara likes to pronounce me—if I ever part with the diamonds now I've got them. However, the cat's out of the bag with a vengeance now!"

And with one of her rapid changes of mood she sat down and gave vent to a perfect peal of laughter that sounded almost startling in the silence that filled the hotel.

CHAPTER XV

"THE PHILISTINES ARE UPON THEE."

It was almost noon, and Lady Pat and Miss Em were lingering over their midday breakfast of cutlets, *pommes de terre frites*, St. Julien and coffee, a continental fashion of *déjeuner* dear to both their hearts.

Without—the sun was shining, the street full of life, gaiety, and bustle, and a prospective morning of shopping, suggested by Lady Pat, still further conduced to raise Miss Em's spirits and put her into that comfortable state of feeling described as being "in charity with all mankind."

"You don't seem interested in your correspondence, Emilia," at last observed the elder lady with a glance at the unopened letters lying beside her god-daughter's plate.

"No," answered Miss Em tranquilly; "I prefer a hot cutlet to news or bills. There's nothing so interesting as the former—here," and her white fingers moved the various envelopes aside, then suddenly singled out one, and for a moment lifted it to interested scrutiny.

"It looks like Aunt Bedelia's writing!" she exclaimed. "But how could she know I was here?"

"Why do people always speculate as to the identity or motives of a correspondent, when the mere opening of a envelope would at once answer both?" murmured Lady Pat lazily.

Miss Em laughed. "Sounds like a conundrum," she said; "I suppose it is foolish. Well, here goes to convince myself," and she tore open the flimsy covering, and ran her eyes rapidly over the close, fine writing it revealed.

"It is from Aunt Bedelia. She only says she 'has heard' I am staying here. She wants me to dine with her to-night. Have we any engagement?"

"I think not," answered Lady Pat reflectively. "I was going to propose the theatre, but you know our arrangement, my dear,—you are always to do exactly as you please when you stay with me. Your aunt, of course, has a claim upon you; you had better go there to-night. I suppose it is one of her card-parties?"

"She only says: 'Two or three old friends,' Miss Em answered, looking down at the letter. What it did say was really: "*If you know any man who plays a good hand at whist or loo, pray bring him; but no woman, 'an you love me.' I am looking forward to one of our old delightful evenings!*"

"The wicked old rake!" thought Miss Em. "She's not a bit changed—and seventy-five if she's a day."

She folded up the missive and put it in her pocket, while she finished her breakfast with a leisurely appreciation of its excellence, to which recent memories of Mrs. O'Hara's *ménage* afforded additional zest.

Lady Pat said nothing about Sir Jasper, though they discussed the ball freely, and wondered why the Lord Lieutenant had not put in an appearance, and what could have induced Mrs. Druce-Hay, usually known as "Satan" and about as broad as she was long, to appear in white satin, and *décolletée à faire peur*, and why Lady Jolijambe had painted so glaringly, and the faded Miss Nolan chosen to whiten her face with a powder that gave it a ghastly resemblance to a clown's. Then having satirised and dissected friends and enemies with charming impartiality they retired to their own rooms to prepare for their drive.

"After all, money makes life very pleasant," reflected Miss Em, as she donned her neat tweed costume, and made notes of the various articles necessary to replenish her wardrobe, and which Lady Pat's credit would furnish forth. "One can't get along without it. Washed muslins and turned skirts may pass muster for 'sweet seventeen,' but there's no doubt a *woman* must dress well, if she wants to hold her own."

She drew on her gloves thoughtfully, her mind busy with projects and reflections chiefly connected with the evening.

"If by some happy chance I could meet Raikes I'd ask him to go with me, and Paddy too for that matter. It's a mercy she hasn't invited Lady Pat; I think we should be a little too much even for her nerves."

Then she laughed softly and took up her list and for the next two hours gave herself up to the delights of selecting and ordering gowns and bonnets and other articles of feminine adornment.

"You'll want a lot of clothes if we go away," said Lady Pat, as they stopped before the humble residence of the "useful dressmaker" to leave a message requiring her attendance the next morning.

"Is there an *if* about it?" asked Miss Em, her eyes flashing a rapid challenge which Lady Pat understood perfectly.

"The best laid plans of mice and men," she quoted laughingly. "You know I am never sure of doing anything until it is actually *done*."

"She wants to be sure of Sir Jasper's intentions," thought Miss Em. "I could almost find it in me to hope she may be disappointed, but I suppose that's rather foolish; it may be my last chance."

The sight of a hat lifted in salutation arrested her attention.

She bent forward eagerly. "It is Major Raikes; do stop the carriage, please; the very person I want to speak to!"

"And I'm going into this shop, so I'll not interrupt you," as the carriage drew up at a fashionable emporium in Sackville Street. She dismounted, and, after a few words to the major passed in, leaving him and Miss Em together.

"My dear major," she exclaimed impetuously, "will you come to a card-party with me to-night? I've *carte blanche* to bring any one I like, so long as he can *play*, and doesn't object to moderately high stakes."

"I think I can answer for myself in both those particulars," said the major; "and of course I'm at your service, Miss O'Hara, and honoured to be so. May I ask, do I know the——"

"Oh! it's at my aunt's, Miss Bedelia O'Hara's. Surely you've met

her somewhere. She's lived in Dublin the best part of her life. No? haven't you? (as he shook his head) well then, it's time you should; she's quite the historical character of the family. If I possessed any literary talent I'd write her life. She has two weaknesses, cookery and cards. Shall you be seeing Paddy to-day? If so, *do* ask him to come a'so."

The major promised. "What time?" he asked. "You've only said evening."

"Oh, nine o'clock or thereabouts," said Miss Em. "Here's the address."

She tore off a slip of paper, the heading of the letter she had received, and thrust it into his hand just as Lady Pat appeared in the doorway. The major raised his hat to both ladies, and walked off.

"I do hope she is not flirting with him," thought Lady Pat anxiously, as she glanced at Miss Em's radiant face. "She never looks as pleased as *that*, unless she's plotting some mischief!"

* * * * *

"Well, aunt, here I am!"

Thus Miss Em announced herself at seven o'clock that evening, popping her head unceremoniously into the "parlour," as Miss O'Hara called the apartment which modern villa-ism now thinks fit to term "drawing-room."

But Miss Bedelia O'Hara had a great many old-fashioned prejudices, and this was one.

She was an erect spare old lady, of any age between sixty and seventy—no one knew exactly to a few years. She wore her own hair looped over either side, of sharply defined features and keen dark eyes, in a style she termed *bandeaux*, but which Miss Em described as "window curtains."

Her erect carriage and pale clear skin and the aforesaid sharp features gave her an air of distinction. She always dressed in black, and was addicted to massive gold ornaments, in the shape of chain, brooch and earrings. Her love of gossip and keen acquaintance with her neighbours' affairs made her rather formidable to those offenders in whose interests she acted as detective, or whose private life shunned that "fierce light which beats" not only upon the "throne," but the ordinary leather-covered arm-chair of the evil-doer. Yet she was ease-loving and kindly at heart, despite her sharpness of tongue and keenness of vision. She was no friend to calm surroundings; her life had never been tranquil, and age for her was no smoothly gliding stream, but a restless current, apt to twist and turn and make eccentric dashes into various inlets which might as well have been avoided.

It was to this lady that Miss Em announced herself so unceremoniously, yet with the confidence of one who knows herself welcome.

"I've come early on purpose," she added after the old lady had embraced her with effusive affection. "I knew you would have plenty to tell me."

For the next five minutes question and answer went on with the briskness of a fusillade, as if to emphasise the truth of this statement. Lady Pat, the Kellys' ball, the health of the folk at Carrig-duve, the probable duration of Miss Em's stay in Dublin, a bankruptcy and divorce case, a new receipt for fish sauce which Miss Bedelia had invented for that evening, and a lament over a run of ill-luck at nap,—all these subjects were jumbled together, and seemed to possess the deepest interest for both aunt and niece.

"I hope Lady Patricia won't think me discourteous for not inviting

her," remarked the old lady at last. "But I wanted you all to myself until dinner was over. By the way, my dear, have you asked any one in to take a hand?"

"Yes; two men—Paddy Kearney, you know, and a friend of his—a Major Raikes. He is delightful company and doesn't object to high stakes."

Aunt Bedelia's dark eyes glistened approvingly. These were guests after her own heart.

Miss Em had been perfectly right when she spoke of the "vice of gambling" as an inheritance of the O'Hara blood. Bedelia O'Hara was a gambler, heart and soul. She could bear loss or gain with equal equanimity, and, having fortunately a small income secured against risks, had managed to keep her head above water even under long runs of bad luck and the obligation of recklessly incurred debts.

She was warmly attached to her niece, in whom she had always recognised the true O'Hara characteristics, and whose rebellion against the yoke of matrimony resembled her own, and indeed displayed every prospect of leaving her stranded also on the shores of celibacy.

The announcement of dinner cut short the discussion of personal matters for a time, and the two ladies betook themselves to the dining-room, a small, cosy apartment, whose limited accommodation was seldom taxed to the extent of more than six or eight guests. But Miss Bedelia had a weakness for cookery and a talent for invention, which rendered this limited number a boon, just as isolated cases of sickness are preferable to epidemics.

Along with the ardour of inventive genius, Fate had dowered this amateur Francatelli with the perpetual odium of failure. She would lie awake for hours studying out some marvellous combination of seasoning, or flavouring, or icing; she would see in her "mind's eye," as she described it, the perfection of a dish, the charm of an *entrée*; and yet, wedded to the prosaic details of ingredients, and the hazards of oven or frying-pan, the said dish or *entrée* would degenerate into a nauseous compound, over-flavoured or under-cooked, or else show a malevolent determination to turn into something totally different from its inventor's original design.

But all artists have suffered from similar freaks. The design of the creator and the obduracy of the thing created have from time immemorial sounded a harsh note of discouragement to inventive ears. Miss Bedelia was not to be discouraged by such paltry rebuffs. She returned again and again to the charge with a zeal that was almost admirable, and a tenacity of purpose that was worthy of a Napoleon. "Not to know yourself defeated" is an excellent principle, and acts almost as well as an assurance of victory. Miss Em, secure in the possession of an admirable digestion, awaited the advent of the new sauce with perfect equanimity.

Its look left nothing to be desired, though a strong flavour of sherry suggested antagonism to the accompanying turbot.

Miss Bedelia's invention had not thought proper to "leave well alone," but boldly dashed at marsala for flavouring *Sauce Hollandaise*, arguing that sherry was the due accompaniment to fish.

"What do you think of it, Peg my dear?" she asked her niece anxiously.

Miss Em tried to be diplomatic, and observed that the colour was beautiful, but the flavour was surely a little—well—just a very little—vinous. Otherwise it was a delightful sauce, putting shrimps and anchovy and orthodox "melted butter" quite into the shade.

All the same she secured her plate from observation, and gave a significant glance to the elderly parlour-maid, well understood of that personage, who had known her from girlhood, and ranked her next to her mistress in her affections.

That glance had the freemasonry of an understood signal, and the plate was dexterously removed without hurting the feelings of the hostess by any hint of rejected contents. She was already astride of her hobby, having had a new inspiration which she described poetically as "a dream of potatoes boiled in milk, shredded and iced, and served as a sweet."

Miss Em agreed that it sounded delicious, though a little unseasonable for winter parties. She breathed freely as the next course displayed the simplicity of a homely fowl, boiled and served with parsley and bacon; the sweets too were simple and safe, as Miss Bedelia had entrusted them to the cook, being too absorbed by her own particular invention of the hour to attempt anything else.

Coffee and liqueur were brought in with the dessert, while the elderly parlour-maid prepared the "parlour" for expected guests by bringing out a green baize-covered table, and arranging various packs of cards on it.

Aunt Bedelia sipped her chartreuse with the approbation of a connoisseur, and waxed communicative over a recent "scandal in high life" which had shocked society in Dublin to the core.

"To lose such a position!"—she lamented, "and after having put up with her husband for so long. I really don't know why she should have left him. There's so little difference in men when it comes to *living* with them that I never can understand a woman running away from one to take up with another."

Miss Em's eyes looked faintly quizzical; perhaps she wondered how a maiden lady of Aunt Bedelia's years could pronounce so authoritatively on the nature of the stronger sex.

"There *seems* a great deal of difference in them," she observed.

"Yes, while they are lovers," said Aunt Bedelia sharply. "Gracious powers! the foolish things women do for men! I lose all patience when I think of it. What a multitude of faults she can excuse in him, if he only pleads he 'loves her!'"

"Love is the best thing in life according to the best authorities," said Miss Em, who delighted in drawing out sentiments of this description from the old lady.

"According to fools!" snapped Aunt Bedelia. "Love! faugh! a schoolboy's fancy for the first pretty face, a girl's dream of the impossible, and a woman's realisation of it!"

"But there must be a good deal in it, or we should not see so many wrecked and unhappy lives."

"There is no more in love itself, as a passion or sentiment, than there is in the individual who professes it. Human nature is weak, and the wear and tear of life leave no room for poetry."

"And yet," argued Miss Em, "no woman likes to marry without some sort of sentiment in the matter."

"Don't they?" answered her aunt. "I fancy society could tell you a different story. If I had my youth over again——"

She stopped abruptly. Perhaps memory can give a stab of remembered pain even when hearts are old and brows wrinkled; and the O'Haras, men and women alike, had been credited with the ability "to love madly,

and hate badly ;" but the bond of remembrance soon released its hold, and the keen well-tutored face took back its natural expression.

"Perhaps it's as well I can't," she went on. "I might make a fool of myself ; there's no knowing, and we won't take other folk's counsel. However, a pinch of experience is worth a pound of advice. You've had both, Peg."

"I have," said Miss Em, with a sudden tightening of her lips ; "I can't say, though, that I've made very good use of them."

"I always feel that you'll make a good sensible marriage yet," remarked Aunt Bedelia, as she placidly crossed her withered hands, on which a few valuable rings were sparkling ; "you owe it to your family, and yourself."

"You might have set me the example," said Miss Em ; "you had every opportunity."

"Perhaps I had. But I was hard to please when pleasure was possible ; and Time has a knack of drifting us on before we are well aware of it. I might have done a great deal with my life, but I have only been one of the paviors of hell," she added bitterly. "Be warned by me, Peg. There's no living creature I care for but yourself, and all I have will be yours, as I've often told you ; still, I fancy you'd be happier for having a house of your own, and an assured position."

Miss Em shook her head rebelliously. "I like freedom, and all the married women I've ever known are little better than slaves. Willing ones, rebellious ones ; but slaves in some sort, with chains either proudly displayed, or jealously hidden—but wasn't that the bell, aunt ?"

"Yes," said the old lady, rising and pushing aside the liqueur-stand ; "I wonder who are the first arrivals—your friends or mine ?"

* * * * *

Aunt Bedelia made a charming hostess to men. Her own sex were less approving. Her sharp tongue, quick vision, and insight into their "little ways," being characteristics that met with various uncomplimentary opinions.

It was strange that both aunt and niece should be so popular with a sex to whom both had denied the privilege of annexation. Miss Em had studied her aunt with curious interest, seeing in her mode of life a possible reflection of her own future. They had always been strangely attached to one another, lenient to errors, and admiring of better qualities, upheld by that curious family chivalry which is essentially Irish, and will allow no third person to find fault with faults however apparent.

The card-party consisted of six, and midnight found them deeply absorbed in nap. The stakes had been moderate hitherto, and the luck pretty evenly divided. A handsome and rather "fast" little widow, Mrs. O'Connell, and an elderly admirer of hers, were the two guests Aunt Bedelia had invited. Major Raikes had brought Paddy Kearney.

As the clock struck twelve they left off playing for a short time, and discussed luck and losses while partaking of the sandwiches, wine, and whisky punch, and various other refreshments which had been brought in.

Miss Em made some remark as to departure, but Mrs. O'Connell overruled the suggestion, and she was easily persuaded to stay on. As for Aunt Bedelia, she was ready to sit up all the night when cards were in question, and Fortune had favoured her to-night in a special manner.

The chill sound of rain was audible in the street without, and rendered

the cosy parlour doubly attractive. The mellow odours of punch and the permission for cigars were further inducement to remain; and Mrs. O'Connell's tongue became more recklessly amusing, and Miss Em and Aunt Bedelia more than usually entertaining, under the influence of the somewhat potent beverage which had been served to them by Paddy and the major.

Play was resumed, and a suggestion of higher stakes met with no opposition. Time passed swiftly, but no memory of prudence touched the flying hours with anything so powerful as restraint.

Miss Em, glancing at the paper beside her, was surprised to find her losses touching on three figures; but the fact seemed only to fire the chances of the game with fresh excitement. She threw herself heart and soul into it, playing as no one there played, losing as no one there lost.

The first faint streaks of daylight were peering through the closed blinds before any thought of leaving that fatal green board seemed to occur to hostess or guests. When at last they separated and Miss Em, for decency's sake, felt compelled to accept her aunt's offer of a bed, instead of returning to the hotel, she had lost over a hundred pounds.

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"Anne," said Lady Pat next morning, weary of waiting breakfast, "do go to Miss O'Hara's room and tell her how late it is. I'm quite tired of waiting."

In two or three minutes Anne, the stately, returned, her face white and anxious.

"If you please, my lady, Miss O'Hara isn't in her room, and she can't have come home all night, for the bed hasn't been slept in."

Lady Pat looked first startled, then scandalised. "Not come home all night! What will the hotel people think?"

"Perhaps she has stayed at her aunt's, my lady?"

"Ah!" Lady Pat gave a sigh of relief. "Not unlikely, Anne. Oblige me by going round to inquire if that is the case. You know the address; you had better take a fly——"

She stopped abruptly. Hurried steps, voices, a gay laugh, and the culprit was in the room.

"Dear Lady Pat, a thousand apologies! Do forgive me. Aunt Bedelia kept things up so late, and it was such a wretched night, so I slept there; I thought I'd just catch you at breakfast. Morning, Anne! You look quite scared; did you think I had made away with myself? Lady Pat, a cup of coffee or I'll die. Any letters?"

"One—from Carrig-duve," and Lady Pat handed it to her, while Anne retired and closed the door, her face having regained its usual dignified composure.

"Madame O'Hara, as I live! Gracious powers, what has happened that *she* should write to me?"

She tore open the envelope, and flashed her eyes rapidly over the contents. A red flush rose to her brow, and for a moment anger and defiance fought swiftly for expression, then she suddenly crushed up the letter and put it in her pocket. Lady Pat handed her the coffee-cup, with an inquiring glance.

"Well?" she asked.

Miss Em's answer was enigmatical.

"The Philistines be upon thee, Samson," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

TROUBLED WATERS

LIGHTLY as Miss Em treated the subject, she was secretly furious at Mrs. O'Hara's letter, which was couched in most insulting terms, and demanded instant restoration of her *stolen* property.

The fact of that "old trumpery," as her step-daughter termed it, being amongst the diamonds, threatened unpleasant complications.

But Miss Em had a scheme in her own mind which she had intended to put into execution this very morning; and after a brief parley with herself, in which prudence played a small, but wholly inefficient part, she determined to carry it out.

The first thing was to get rid of Lady Pat and gain for herself a free hour. Fortunately, this proved easier than at first appeared possible; for Lady Pat reminded her that the "useful dressmaker" was to put in an appearance, in order to supervise, fit, and modernise such dresses as were worth these alterations. Suggesting that Miss Em had better give up the morning to this important matter, and take Anne into the conference, Lady Pat excused herself from being present on the plea of an engagement. Thus favoured by circumstances, Miss Em saw the way clear to her own project.

No sooner had Lady Pat departed in the carriage than she summoned Anne, and gave her full directions as to the different skirts and bodices which offered any possibility of improvement; thus judiciously flattering the maid by relying on her assistance, and permitting her suggestions.

"I quite trust to you," she said in conclusion, as she hastily put herself into walking garb, supplemented by a more than usually thick veil. Anne noticed this, and also that she carried two parcels in her hand; but Miss Em's eccentricities and vagaries were no novelty to her, and even had they been so, she would not have felt it her place to make any remark thereon.

The rain had passed off, but the sky was grey and lowering. It was one of those days that depression seems to have marked for its own, and Nature heaves death-sighs throughout hours of gloom. Miss Em stood in the hotel porch and surveyed the muddy streets and threatening clouds with some apprehension.

"I ought to have brought an umbrella," she thought, but her hands were encumbered, and her skirts would require attention; she resolved to run the risk of showers, and was just stepping boldly forward when she heard her name pronounced, and glancing back saw Sir Jasper Lustrell hastening after her.

"Are you going out?" he asked eagerly and unnecessarily. "May I have the pleasure of walking with you?"

"Good heavens! what a nuisance!" thought Miss Em. "However shall I get rid of him?"

But she only smiled sweetly on the old valetudinarian, and said that she would be delighted. "But I'm only going to the post-office," she added.

Sir Jasper, it appeared, was bound in the same direction; so they proceeded down the street together, unconscious of the lynx eyes of Miss Sabina watching this proceeding from an upper window.

Miss Em dashed into conversation with her usual *aplomb*; but her mind was ill at ease, and Sir Jasper's courtly compliments were more

annoying than pleasing. When they reached the post-office she expected he would take his leave, but he only offered to wait for her.

There was nothing for it but to lie boldly. Miss Em stated that an appointment with a dressmaker would prevent her taking advantage of his escort. The old baronet looked disconcerted; it was rarely that he offered such attentions, and probably he was surprised they were not more ardently welcomed. However, he had no further excuse for lingering and so took himself off.

Miss Em registered one of her parcels, and left it to be forwarded to its destination; the other she retained. On leaving the post-office she walked down the street very rapidly, glancing with some apprehension at the different figures she passed. She stopped at last before a plate-glass window, whose tempting array of jewellery, old china, and old silver, was well deserving of attention. But Miss Em's eyes, to any one observing her, were only roving to right and left, and not until the street was comparatively deserted, did she seem to make up her mind to enter the emporium. It was a full quarter of an hour before she emerged, flushed and radiant, but *minus* her parcel.

Calling the first vacant fly, she sprang into it and was driven rapidly away to the Gresham. Lady Pat had not yet returned; so she speedily divested herself of hat and mantle, and then sat down to write a letter which she had been composing at intervals all the morning.

The task appeared to afford her unmitigated satisfaction.

"I'd like to see Madame Skinflint's face when she reads *that!*" she said, as she closed the envelope; "there's not much, but there's enough."

Certainly there was not much. The letter said briefly, and without even the customary form of address:—

"I have sent back your *own* valuable property, which I discovered accidentally amongst my diamonds; your claim to the latter has yet to be proved. In the interim of the proceedings you threaten I have placed them in the safe custody of Messrs. Needham, Watts & Co., who have kindly advanced me £200 on them.—EMILIA O'HARA."

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Miss Em was in radiant spirits at luncheon; so much so that Lady Pat suspected mischief. She gave an account of Aunt Bedelia's dinner and card-party that amused the elder lady immensely; but, needless to say, she observed a discreet silence on the subject of her own losses and the proceedings of the morning. But the satisfaction arising from a successfully carried out scheme was apparent, and the relief of knowing her debt to Mrs. O'Connell and Major Raikes could be paid off at once, sent her mercurial temperament up to its highest limits.

Besides, there were engagements for afternoon and evening that promised an agreeable distraction. Miss Em, however, vainly endeavoured to gain any positive information respecting Lady Pat's intentions as to going abroad. It was plain that the scheme of marrying her to Sir Jasper was paramount in the mind of her godmother; and though Miss Em affected to laugh at it as impossible, she was quite conscious that it mainly rested with herself to prove the reverse. As yet, however, she had not made up her mind on the subject; nor could she bring herself to view it without distaste. But the necessity of "keeping in" with Lady Pat made her diplomatic, and she had no desire that the affair of the diamonds or her recent losses at cards should reach that lady's ears.

The strongest spirits have their moments of timidity, and Miss Em never felt so genuinely weak as after she had done something unusually audacious. If her father and stepmother chose to make a fuss over this last exploit it would be extremely unpleasant for her, to say the least of it, and viewed in that light Sir Jasper seemed an admirable sop to throw to Cerberus. They would not be severe on an escapade which reflected on the first lady of the county.

It was not till night, however, that her spirits quieted down, when the allurements of a *tête-à-tête* had brought forth all the worldly wisdom and skilful counsel of that astute *mondaine*, Lady Pat.

They had met Sir Jasper at dinner, and again his attentions had been so marked as to attract notice and add another shade of sourness to Miss Sabina Lustrell's expression. She had been as nearly rude as possible to Miss Em, thereby adding only an incentive to her acceptance of the old baronet's compliments and flatteries.

"If I ever marry him it will be as much to spite that hateful old maid as anything else!" she said to Lady Pat as they sat by the fire and sipped Anne's carefully prepared cordial before retiring for the night.

"Marry him for any reason you please, so only you *do* marry him," thought Lady Pat; but aloud she only remarked that it was a pity good women were so uninteresting. "I daresay," she murmured dreamily, "that the excellent Sabina has never done anything wrong or regrettable in her life; and yet I've never heard she had one real friend, nor would her death wring a genuine tear from any eye."

"You think, then, that to be interesting it is necessary to be wicked?" remarked Miss Em.

"Oh no, I don't go as far as *that*. I mean that a little experience, a little knowledge of temptation, is worth more to a woman than a thousand theories. What is unknown cannot be understood; and so many women preach virtue from an exalted pinnacle of pure ignorance of vice, that their opinions are practically worthless."

"That is true enough," said Miss Em. "The fact of being 'untempted' seems to afford a moral standpoint from which to view the weak and the fallen. Do you remember what they were saying to-night of Lady Gaylord?"

"Yes. One hears of nothing else but that case. The curious part about it is that the man she has gone off with is every whit as bad a character as Lord Gaylord himself."

"Still, he has been devoted to her for years; and a villain all one's own is at least preferable to a villain who is unfaithful."

"I suppose it is possible to hate the sin and love the sinner," observed Lady Pat, between thoughtful sips of her cordial. "Women are anomalies, my dear. There's no doubt of that. Our hearts outweigh our brains, and even the most reasonable of us seem to lose our heads at times. Oh, the blessing of a quiet slumbrous nature, that cannot rage and fume and dash itself against the rocks of circumstance!"

"Its losses may outweigh its gain."

"Not if the owner is unconscious of the fact. I have come across two or three such people in the course of my life, and they seemed as nearly happy as any mortals could be on this uncertain plane."

"Happy!" echoed Miss Em drearily: "that misapplied and misunderstood word! How vague its meaning is to most of us!"

"I think," said Lady Pat, as she raised an embroidered flounce from

an arched instep, so as to give her feet the benefit of the fire, "that the best definition I ever heard of happiness was that it is 'a sense of possibilities waiting for fulfilment.'"

"That's only a new cloak for an old truth, 'Man never is, but always to be blessed,'" Miss Em answered. "Of course, it is eminently right, not to say religious, to be satisfied with one's position in life, and pretend to believe it is the very best position for us, but who is so—honestly?"

"No one," I'm afraid," laughed Lady Pat, "unless it's a bishop; they have always seemed to me most enviable persons. I should like to have married one if only to prove my theory."

"Might not that have been the very way to *disprove* it?" asked Miss Em mischievously. "A bishop is but a man after all; and I suppose the silk apron and gaiters don't cover more exalted virtues than may exist under tweed knickerbockers or check suits."

"Oh, my dear! how shocking! a dignitary of the Church compared to——"

"Our own tourist's inexpressibles at 19/11," laughed Miss Em. "And why not? If they were both shipwrecked on a desert island we should soon prove the relative value of the man and the profession."

"But there is no question of desert islands," said Lady Pat with dignity. "And though I am not a prejudiced person exactly, I have always maintained that clerical dignity should be upheld and revered."

"It is a pity that the clerical dignitaries themselves haven't done more to elevate their office," said Miss Em, who had strong ideas on this point. "Those who hold the highest positions in the Church have proved but frail reeds to trust to when leadership or guidance is required. In any cases of intellectual difficulty a clergyman is the last person I should dream of consulting. The chains of dogma and sectarianism bind them so closely that freedom of thought is impossible."

"They hold a very responsible position," said Lady Pat, "and naturally feel reluctant to give opinions that may reflect upon it."

"There are two points I have always noticed as distinguishing them, Catholics and Protestants alike," said Miss Em; "one is a strong belief in their own importance (by virtue of office), the other a Jesuitical tendency which, however true the religion it upholds, fails in making it a religion of *truth*. A priest—I speak in general terms, without reference to creed—will never give you a straight, fair answer to a plain question. His office seems to forbid it. They generalise, and take refuge in platitudes and reservations which can only deepen one's distrust. Sometimes I think that a state of calm scepticism would be preferable to unsolved doubts, and unanswerable arguments."

Lady Pat sighed. "It is a state of feeling we all go through," she said. "For my part I never could find any comfort in the Romish faith. It vulgarises so much that is beautiful. Look at their symbols and images if you want an illustration of my meaning. Their bleeding hearts and distorted figures, and idiotic pictures of so-called 'saints.' The grandest school of Art the world has ever known was ruined by the age of superstition in which it was founded. All independent taste, all wealth of genius had to be sacrificed to the iron rule of the priesthood; and I have always felt that such sacrifice of fame and independence was dearly bought. You have only to wander through any of the churches or cathedrals in France, Italy, or Spain, to have ample illustration of my meaning. The

average conception of the Deity must be a very low one if men can limit His taste to what is repulsive and inartistic to their own."

"I have had the same idea while looking on at a Roman Catholic service," remarked Miss Em. "I can never do so without wondering how the mind of man could possibly frame anything so idiotic and insulting! The posturing, the gestures, the dressing-up like mature dolls, the bowing and bobbing and grimacing,—it is all so painfully humiliating, so wanting in true dignity, and so utterly uncalled for. It says so plainly: 'I, *man*, am doing all this in self-glorification,' but it never—at least, to my mind—conveys one thought of reverence, or one feeling of exalted worship. The music does its best to excite emotion, but that even is made more sensual than elevating; and when you hear a boy's exquisite voice, and know that there are men cruel enough to force him to sacrifice the whole future of manhood for its sake, so that some pontiff or selfish dignitary may boast of its possession—Oh! of course, one oughtn't to speak of such things, we know that; but, all the same, they exist, along with a hundred other vices and cruelties that hypocrisy veils and conventionality governs!"

"Why, Emilia, my dear child!"

Lady Pat was looking at her in astonishment—at the flushed cheek, the flashing eye, the quivering lips, signs of fierce and unwonted emotion which she had rarely witnessed.

Miss Em made a sudden effort to regain her usual self-control, but it was not easy. "The subject excited me," she said. "It brought back a time of misery and weakness—a time when I cried for bread and received a stone!—when I would have poured my heart's blood out for any *real* comfort, any certain assurance that God and Peace were in that dark future to which the grave was but a passage."

"You mean," said Lady Pat in a low strained voice, "that time you entered the convent?"

"Yes. Life had lost all charm. I was in the mood that makes saints or sinners of women. Unfortunately, there is no neutral ground. We either harm or bless."

Lady Pat looked at her somewhat anxiously. There were portions and phases of her god-daughter's life with which she was quite unfamiliar, despite the affection and confidence which existed between them. This convent episode was one, when she had thrown aside one form of religion for another, and sought to place a barrier between herself and that world with which she was at variance. It was the only time in her life when dissatisfaction had taken positive form; but she came forth from the ordeal or experiment in a worse state than she had entered it. "Happiness makes goodness," she affirmed, "and misery makes sin." The truism was an old one, but self-evident. Years and youth went by in the endeavour to recapture what seemed happiness; but that restless Will o' the Wisp defied her efforts, and led her only into quagmires of recklessness, the mire of whose memory clung about her to this day.

"Don't you think," suggested Lady Pat softly, "that having seen so much, and felt so much, you might quiet down into a sort of content? There are few troubles that money cannot soothe and an assured position benefit. Promise me to think seriously of this. I have a special reason for asking it."

Miss Em looked up quickly. Her heart gave a guilty throb of apprehension. "You have heard—something?" she said faintly.

"Yes," said Lady Pat with gravity; "I don't know why I shouldn't tell you. Of course, I knew always that you had certain expectations from your aunt, Miss O'Hara, and that her money would leave you independent of anything your father might be influenced to do. Well, to-day I happened to meet her solicitor, who is also mine, and in course of conversation he let out that she has suffered so severely by speculations of one sort or another that in a sudden fit of terror she has sunk a large portion of her income in an annuity. This means that at her death you will have really next to nothing. He seemed to think she had told you, but I felt sure you were ignorant of the matter."

Miss Em had grown very pale. "Yes," she said; "I knew nothing of it."

They were both silent for a time, lost in a train of thought that led to a vast area of possibilities. To Miss Em it seemed that a net of doom was closing round her slowly and surely, that what had looked merely a jest at first was turning into very serious earnest. To live as she had been doing for the last ten years was becoming distasteful; the constant strain it entailed on mind, energy, and invention was more of a tax than an amusement. There were times when peace and rest seemed the most desirable of earthly blessings, yet they were blessings only possible to an assured and certain amount of wealth. Poverty had always been to her a thing hateful and to be avoided; she considered that most of the ills and troubles of life sprang from want of means. Riches gave independence to men and women alike, and were surely worth some sacrifice. She roused herself at last with a sort of desperate energy.

"Aunt Bedelia was my last chance," she said. "You know I have nothing to expect from my father. He is completely under the thumb of Madame Skinflint."

"And an old man now, my dear," said Lady Pat softly.

"Yes; that makes it worse."

She sat very still, looking at the fire as it glowed between the iron bars of the grate.

"I think," she said at last, "I shall do it."

"Do what?" asked Lady Pat, a little too eagerly.

"Marry Sir Jasper Lustrell, if he asks me. All the same, he may never do *that*."

Lady Pat dropped her skirt over the embroidered stockings and slender feet she had been toasting so carefully; a complacent smile hovered round her lips. "I wish," she said, as she rose and pushed back her chair, "that I was only half as sure of meeting my bishop."

Miss Em laughed somewhat mirthlessly. She was suddenly conscious of fatigue and general weariness.

"It is always the unexpected that happens," she said; "who knows but what his Grace of Lawn and Gaiters may appear on your horizon yet?"

CHAPTER XVII

"I WILL SAY 'YES'"

A WEEK had gone by. Time had not wrought any startling change in the relative positions of Miss Em and Sir Jasper, but it had brought news from Carrig-duve in the shape of a letter from Quinlan, describing what she termed "ructions" after the discovery of the diamond abstraction.

It appeared that the receipt of her own jewellery and Miss Em's letter had thrown Mrs. O'Hara into such a "fayver of rage," that she had been quite ill, and obliged to keep her bed, "for which," added the writer, "the saints be praised, for I was just fairly moithered wid her goings on, and she swearin' to have the law o' you, Miss Peg darlint, if it was to cost her last sixpence in this world—and she meant it, and no lie at all, at all."

"I wonder if she means it still," thought Miss Em somewhat uneasily, after reading the letter a second time. It was one of her "dark days,"—days when melancholy and disgust lay heavy on her soul and stamped every prospect with their image.

Feeling utterly unfit for any company but her own, she at last put on her hat and went out, resolving to try a brisk walk to the Phoenix Park as a cure for the threatened attack of "blues."

The sky was, for once, blue and clear, the air had the freshness and crispness of winter without its cold. Her dress of black cloth, with a touch of scarlet at the throat and a wing of the same colour in her astrachan hat, was eminently becoming, and, though she had felt too dispirited to dress for effect, she had rarely looked more effective. Half an hour of rapid exercise brought colour to her clear skin and calmed her nerves. She moderated her pace, and began to take some notice of her surroundings. It was with a sudden sharp sense of distaste and surprise mingled that she saw advancing towards her the well-known figure of Sir Jasper.

His hat was off, and he was shaking hands with her before she had quite made up her mind what to do in order to avoid his company.

"This is indeed fortunate," said the old baronet, his face and voice for once sincere in their duet of expression. "I was just wishing for a congenial companion, something in harmony with Nature, and, lo! Fate sends me Miss O'Hara!"

"I'm afraid I'm not at all in harmony with Nature this morning," announced Miss Em, who was in no mood for florid compliments, and whose present humour made her the reverse of diplomatic.

She evaded his ardent glances, and stood there as if determined that no hint of accompanying her in her walk should be forthcoming. Sir Jasper was far too keen an observer of feminine weakness not to read the signs of petulance. She was out of temper, and had evidently no intention of trying any of the pretty little devices of pleasing which he knew so well.

This fact seemed to him rather pleasant than otherwise. It offered an opportunity of discovering what the *genuine* Miss Em was like, and also appealed to his vanity to soothe or render her forgetful of private annoyance by the charm of his own company. He had been a great favourite with women *once*, and he had always contrived to make them believe in him. His vanity was easily piqued; and having come out with the hope of this meeting, he resolved not to forego any possible excitement or pleasure it might afford.

"Not in harmony with Nature!" he said, repeating her words. "Your looks belie that speech. They are as radiant as the morning itself. May I ask if you are bound in any special direction, and ask you to take pity on my loneliness?"

"I merely came out for a walk," she answered; "but I intended making it a long one."

"The longer the better if I may only share it," he said with exaggerated tenderness.

She murmured something neither coherent nor very audible, but Sir Jasper accepted it as permission, and turned back with her at once. The path was hilly and bordered by shrubberies; Miss Em made no effort to slacken her speed, and her companion felt half inclined to regret his persistence. Conversation was fitful, and rather one-sided for the first half-hour; but after that Miss Em appeared to forget her ill-humour and her grievances, and became her usual gay and brilliant self. The change delighted the old baronet, more especially as he was at liberty to attribute it to his own influence. Still, he vainly endeavoured to give their talk a personal or tender tone. Miss Em would speak of Ireland, its people, and its complex grievances, of home and foreign politics, of "places, persons, and things," in fact; but allow no meandering down side-paths of intimacy, and understand no hints of the passion she was fanning into flame with every successive day.

The truth was she had a horror of being forced into a decision from which there could be no retreat. So long as the future dealt with possibilities, and so long as it offered a prize to win, a goal to reach, life had still some degree of interest; but a marriage with Sir Jasper meant simply a barrier to all future pleasure or excitement—a haven certainly, but a haven from whence she could only gaze out at a dull shoreless ocean, stretching into limitless distance.

But every rebuff he met with in this delicate fencing was only an incentive to perseverance on the part of Sir Jasper. He was not in love with Miss Em, being far too selfish and self-engrossed for the tender passion to have any effect upon him at this period of existence; but he was fascinated by her, and her companionship offered an attractive contrast to that of his sour-tempered and penurious sister; moreover, a strong spirit of opposition to Miss Sabina's judgment and opinions inclined him irresistibly towards one whom she had lost no opportunity of traducing.

Some remark that hinted at an approaching departure from Dublin surprised him into an entreaty that she would remain there a little longer. "It will be so dull without you," he said; "I shall miss you more than I can say."

"Miss *me*?" Miss Em looked at him questioningly, and yet with genuine surprise. "That is too flattering to believe, Sir Jasper," she said.

"I have no wish to flatter you," he answered with serious meaning. "I am only speaking the truth. All the pleasure I have received from my stay here, I owe to you. It seems rather hard that I should be deprived of it at the very moment when I had learnt my dependence."

"We have been neighbours and acquaintances for a long time, Sir Jasper," she said sarcastically, "and yet this discovery is only a fortnight old."

"That, of course, is both my fault and my misfortune," he said tenderly; "though I might plead as excuse the small encouragement given by Carrig-duve to Castle Lustrell."

"You cannot blame me for that," she said hurriedly, the quick blood mounting to her face.

"Certainly not; I am prepared to sympathise with what I feel to be your very trying position there. I only wish I could feel that you would accept such sympathy as an assurance of my personal regard and admiration."

The flush faded as quickly as it had risen; she made a strong effort to laugh off the seriousness of the situation. "You are very good,

Sir Jasper, and sympathy is always a pleasant salve to wounded vanity. Perhaps—now we understand one another better——”

“Ah,” he interrupted, “I am glad to hear you say that! Dear Miss O’Hara, would it be quite impossible for you to—to overlook the disparity of years between us and believe in the sincerity of a devotion you have called to life? It may seem presumptuous to speak of marriage to one so justly admired and so deservedly popular as yourself; but, at least, I can offer you along with such an alliance the position of independence denied you in your own home. Pray do not decide hastily,” he added as she was about to speak;—“favour me, at least, by giving some consideration to what I feel is more an appeal than an inducement.”

“You mean—you really ask me to—to——” stammered Miss Em in genuine bewilderment.

“To be my wife. That is the plain fact. I may seem foolish—indeed, I frankly confess to you I had no idea of a second marriage until—until I felt how indispensable your society was becoming.”

“People will say that I——”

“That you have married the ‘old fool’ for his money. Let them; the world is always more or less uncharitable; its falsehoods matter as little to me now as its judgments did once. I have learnt the value of both. Perhaps age has brought me wisdom or—indifference; at least, it has taught me the worth of a woman’s companionship, the need of a true friend in my hours of loneliness. You will not refuse some consideration to these pleas,” he urged, growing eloquent as he read the signs of disturbance on her face. “After all it may be but a few years the sacrifice would be required of you. Tell me you will think it over.”

“Who hesitates is lost,” thought Miss Em, her mind suddenly caught and engulfed in a conflict of doubts and fears. She could not but feel that she had achieved a great victory, and might achieve a greater triumph. After being “knocked about half her life,” as she expressed it, here was an end to such rough usage; and its acknowledged drawbacks might only be brief after all. Sir Jasper was old; a few years might set her free from the unpalatable bondage of matrimony. The thought of wealth and independence, the position of mistress of Castle Lustrell, the persuasions and arguments of Lady Pat, all came crowding on her memory.

She turned towards Sir Jasper and met his anxious gaze. “There is one point you have not considered,” she said gravely.—“Molly! I know what I have suffered myself at the hands of a stepmother. I should not like to think I had made any young life as unhappy as my own was rendered.”

A slight frown darkened Sir Jasper’s brow. “Molly! Surely she is no obstacle—a girl just from school, who ought to be thankful for such a companion as yourself; besides, she has always been warmly attached to you. If that is your only objection I have nothing to fear.”

“Will you wait for my decision until I have spoken to her?”

“I must bow to your commands whatever form they take,” he said, biting his thin delicate lips with ill-concealed impatience, “but it would be reassuring to hear that you have no decided objection to—myself.”

“Oh! I am sure you know that, Sir Jasper. Indeed, I feel the honour you have done me more than I can express.”

“And when may I hope to have my answer?”

“To-morrow,” she said. “I will see Molly in the morning, and let you know the result.”

He raised her hand to his lips with old-fashioned courtesy.

"It will seem an eternity; but I can only hope the result will answer my anticipations."

They had reached the park gates, and, though Sir Jasper would have died sooner than confess to fatigue, Miss Em saw that the long walk and somewhat rapid pace had taxed his feeble strength considerably. She suggested a cab, and they drove back to the hotel, arriving there just at the moment Lady Pat's carriage stopped the entrance way. She was too diplomatic to look the surprise she felt, and greeted Sir Jasper as if the circumstance of his driving about with her god-daughter was quite an ordinary occurrence. They parted at the door of Lady Pat's sitting-room, Sir Jasper giving a warm pressure to the hand Miss Em extended, and a tender glance that conveyed "Remember" as plainly as any spoken words.

Lady Pat shut the door, and turned an eager face towards her companion. "Well," she said, "has he spoken?"

Miss Em nodded carelessly.

"Yes; the die is cast. I'm to give my answer to-morrow."

"To-morrow! but why did you not decide at once?"

"I—I could not!" she exclaimed, with a sort of despairing energy; "I never found it so hard to make up my mind before."

"Then how did you put him off?" asked Lady Pat curiously.

"I said I must consult Molly."

"Why, what has she to do with it?"

"A great deal if I'm to be her stepmother. I should hate the position if she objected."

"You are not at all the type of objectionable stepmother, and I am sure Molly would greet the arrangement with delight. You'll, of course, have to get rid of Miss Sabina; then there's no earthly reason why Molly and yourself should not hit it off admirably."

"Oh! I've gone over all the pros and cons," said Miss Em somewhat irritably; "and I suppose it will end in saying 'Yes.'"

She took off her hat and sighed.

"I should so much prefer going abroad with you," she added drearily.

"Make Sir Jasper take you to Paris for your honeymoon," suggested Lady Pat, "and then go on to the Riviera. I'll meet you there."

Miss Em shuddered.

"Honeymoon!" she exclaimed bitterly; "as if our very appearance wouldn't give the lie to the word. No, thank you; I shall stay in my own land and my own house—if possible. I have no illusions to destroy; no hopes to fulfil; marriage is but a matter of business, and as such will be conducted."

"I see no reason why you should not be very happy," said Lady Pat. "It is not as if you were marrying a mere *parvenu* for his money; Sir Jasper is a gentleman."

"I never said he was not, but even gentlemen can be guilty of meanness and dishonour. His past is not stainless, and if age has improved his morals, it has increased his selfishness. However, I'm tired of the subject: let us say no more about it. Will you send a note or message asking Molly to come in this afternoon? I must see her."

She left the room then, nor would she come down to luncheon despite Lady Pat's entreaties. She drew down the blinds, and threw herself on the bed, remaining there for hour after hour, staring with wide musing

eyes at the flickering shadows on the wall, and hearing all the sounds of outer life in a dull absent fashion.

"I wonder why he wants to marry me?" she thought. "Perhaps when he has done so, he will repent it. I am not a bit the woman he fancies, and he certainly is no more in love with me than I with him."

Which was true enough, for Sir Jasper's love centred chiefly in himself; but in the advancing shades of age he dreaded to find himself companionless and comparatively alone. His daughter was too young, and his sister too old and sour, to be of either comfort or amusement. Miss Em, on the other hand, had an indescribable charm. She had become, not a passionate necessity, but a daily need; a rest, not a fever, which after all to a man of his years was the most desirable attraction a woman could possess.

He knew nothing of those vagaries of temperament and nature which had been so great a source of trouble to herself and those connected with her. He imagined she would be always as he had found her in the pleasant daily intimacy of their life of late.

Had he seen her now in the grip of this dark hour he would have been startled and shocked. As it was she let her mood run its course unchecked; its errant thoughts seared by the past and distrustful of the future.

A knock at the door, timidly repeated more than once, at last struck upon her semi-conscious meditations. She raised herself on one arm and demanded to know who was there.

"It is I, Molly," said the sweet girl voice, with its faint Irish accent that she knew so well. "May I come in for a moment?"

Miss Em moved slowly to the door and opened it. The pressure of warm arms about her neck, of fresh young lips upon her cheek, seemed startling and strange in the gloom of her surroundings. She said nothing, but closed the door, and drew the girl gently into the room.

"Dear Miss Em, how *could* you doubt, how *could* you hesitate for one moment? Papa told me all. What is for his happiness must be for mine—and you of all people! Why, in the whole world there is no one—*no one*—I would sooner see his wife."

Still Miss Em was silent, thrilled by a sense of calamity from which there was no escape. A sudden helplessness left her passive in the hands of a fate too recklessly challenged.

Molly grew alarmed. The room was so dark that she could scarcely see the face on which her kisses had left the seal of this new bond; but something in the rigidity and silence of the figure, and the coldness of the hands she touched, warned her that she had intruded upon some grief or trouble of whose nature she was quite ignorant.

"Are you ill? What is it?" she asked in alarm.

Miss Em roused herself by a great effort. "Ill? No, my dear, only tired, and very, very sad. I have had a great deal of trouble lately, and been obliged to keep it to myself."

"You poor dear!" said the girl sympathisingly. "But it will all be over now, won't it? and we shall be so happy. The castle will be quite another place under your rule. And"—she hesitated, then added softly, as if afraid of her own temerity,—“you won't let Aunt Sabina remain there, will you?"

"I—I really can't say—I haven't made up my mind," stammered Miss Em, all her usual *savoir faire* overthrown by this unexpected interview. "You see, my dear, I did not accept your father's offer, I—only——"

"Oh, Miss Em!" cried the girl disappointedly; "he seemed so sure you would do so. He said it merely rested with me, and, of course, I could not but be pleased—we've always been such good friends, you and I, and the thought of having you always with me was so delightful! Why, I felt sure it was all settled."

Miss Em seated herself in the arm-chair, and drew the girl caressingly towards her.

"Marriage is a serious thing, Molly," she said. "It's true I'm no young girl fired with romance, and full of ideals;—but still there are many things to consider."

"Papa is very fond of you; he says you are the most charming woman he ever met, and he only wishes to devote himself to your happiness."

"He is very good," said Miss Em, "and his opinion of me is much too flattering."

"And you will say 'Yes'?" whispered Molly coaxingly. "Ah, do, and make us all happy."

She felt the sudden quick throb of the heart against which her pretty head was leaning; it was well, perhaps, that she could not guess at the conflict raging within, or read in the eyes gazing into deepening shadows the despair, but not the peace, of an ended struggle.

"For the happiness I dare not vouch," said Miss Em; "but I will say 'Yes,' Molly, if you wish it."

CHAPTER XVIII

CONGRATULATIONS

AN earthquake, a thunderbolt, or any similar eccentricity of Nature could not have startled the inmates of Carrig-duve more than did the unannounced arrival of Miss Em one rainy evening in February.

Mrs. O'Hara was sitting over a scanty fire, nursing a cold she had caught; her spare figure wrapped in an old woollen shawl, and her nose and eyes in a state of acute inflammation that was shared by her temper.

A more inopportune moment for the arrival of an unwelcome guest could not well have been discovered, but her step-daughter appeared quite indifferent to the form of her reception.

"Well," she said coolly, "here I am; I thought it was no use saying I was coming, as you never do kill the fatted calf in my honour! How are you both?"

She nodded carelessly toward the shawled figure, now sitting bolt upright and surveying her with freezing dignity, dropped a hurried kiss on the startled face of the old man opposite, and then stood facing them both, drawing off her gloves in leisurely fashion.

"What—what is the meaning of this intrusion?" demanded Mrs. O'Hara, in a voice hoarse with suppressed wrath and catarrh.

"I—beg your pardon," said Miss Em coolly. "Intrusion, did you call it? I have been under the impression that this was my home for the last forty years? is it possible I can have made a mistake?"

"I said intrusion, and I mean it!" exclaimed Mrs. O'Hara. "Your disgraceful and unwarrantable conduct on the occasion of your last visit has forced me to—to close my doors against you. I—I do not choose to harbour a *thief* in the house any longer!"

"Then you ought to leave it yourself, my dear madame," said Miss Em, quite unabashed; "for the term is decidedly applicable. You helped yourself to my property without the least ceremony, and I knew it would be useless to ask for its return. That you should have put those paltry bits of pinchbeck of your own with what you knew were family jewels, was a rather foolish proceeding; I returned them as soon as I discovered them. As for the diamonds——"

She paused, with something of the cruelty that leads a cat to spare a little breathing space to the mouse it has been torturing before its final destruction. "As for the diamonds, they are perfectly safe, as I mentioned in my letter, and you can have them back, if you wish, by parting with a little of that gold you are so uselessly hoarding; you can't take it with you to the next world, you know, and you've no child to leave it to. However," she added, laughing at the wrathful face, "I daresay you were put out about the matter; still, it's all over and done with. I had my position to consider, and the meanness I met with here was my chief inducement to help myself to what I knew would be refused if asked for; and really when you hear what has brought me back you must allow that the investment has produced very satisfactory interest."

"The fact of your coming back——" began Mrs. O'Hara wrathfully.

"Oh, it's not for long, believe me," said Miss Em; "only I thought it would look better to be married from here than in Dublin, and I felt sure I could trust to your generosity to do everything in a becoming manner."

"To—be—married!" gasped Mrs. O'Hara. "Impossible! you are joking."

"I am perfectly serious, I assure you. I am going to marry Sir Jasper Lustrell of Castle Lustrell, in exactly one month from the present time."

"But—but——" stammered Mrs. O'Hara, gazing in bewilderment at the calm face and mocking eyes before her.

"But what? Have you any objections to make?" demanded Miss Em, with an enjoyment of the situation that exceeded even her anticipations.

"Sir Jasper—Castle Lustrell!" murmured Mrs. O'Hara distractedly. "I don't believe it. We should have heard something. He would have told your father."

"He left the pleasure of that announcement to me. As I am not only 'of age' but over it, there was no need to make a formal request for my hand; however, as I know you are a stickler for etiquette, your mind will be relieved by the morning post."

She was calmly folding her gloves, but her eyes never relaxed their watchful observation of her stepmother's face, and every sign of disturbance and doubt and anger added zest to a long-anticipated triumph.

Mr. O'Hara roused from a soothing nap, first by his daughter's entrance, and then by this angry warfare, rose from his chair and addressed her: "Emilia, my dear, this is scarcely becoming; what am I to understand?"

Miss Em turned to him and her face softened. "I have promised to marry Sir Jasper Lustrell, father, subject, of course, to your approval. He is writing to you on the matter. I came home to tell you. I should prefer to be married from Carrig-duve, though Lady Pat wished me to stay in Dublin and allow her to arrange everything."

"No, no, of course not. That would never do!" burst forth the old man excitedly. "My daughter must, of course, be married from her father's house, and—and everything shall be done in a manner befitting

an O'Hara, my dear. It is only right that it should be. I—I congratulate you on your choice. It is most—suitable, and I trust you will be very happy—very happy."

He rubbed his thin hands together, and glanced appealingly at his wife, whose looks were anything but congratulatory.

"That I'm sure she won't," snapped the good lady bitingly. "A mercenary marriage with an old hypochondriac who has one foot in the grave! Of course, every one can see what it's done for,—one wants a nurse and the other a fortune! Marriage, indeed! I call it a disgraceful bargain, and so will every one who hears of it."

"I think," said Miss Em, growing very white, "that *you* are the last person in the world to speak in such terms of marriage. You can scarcely pretend that you considered it from a very lofty standpoint, or were blind to its material advantages, even when you were considerably my senior. Neither have you made home so agreeable that I should cling to it in preference to an independent position, and a very enviable one. If you had a daughter to marry I fancy we should hear very little of the disadvantages attending Castle Lustrell and its prospective mistress."

This being far too sharp a home-thrust for denial, Mrs. O'Hara took refuge in portentous sniffs and snorts and broken ejaculations, which seemed to convey that Sir Jasper was a deluded victim and Miss Em a designing hypocrite.

Her step-daughter cut short these jeremiads abruptly, however, by announcing that she had arranged to have everything connected with the ceremony done in first-rate style by a Dublin firm; that she had ordered her *trousseau* at one of the best houses, and hoped also that her father would at once redeem the O'Hara diamonds, as she would need them for the occasion. Having by this time reduced Mrs. O'Hara into speechless rage at so much audacity, Miss Em considered it best to retire, and swept out of the room in lofty triumph, secure of victory for once.

In the bedroom she found Quinlan on her knees lighting a fire, as a set-off to the comfortless and dismantled appearance of that apartment.

"Shure, 'twas a shame for yez not to be saying ye was coming back, Miss Peg dear," said the old woman, between puffs of smoke and energetic appeals from the bellows. "Goin' away for months, as ye said, and thin taking us by surprise like this, and divil a bit o' comfort in the house for ye; and what I'm to send up for dinner the Lord only knows. I've turned Bridget down to the village; but whether she'll be getting flesh or fowl, or even a herrin', is more than I can say. What's brought ye back, darlin',—not bad luck, I hope?"

"No," answered her mistress, coming over to the fireplace, and there standing to look thoughtfully down at the blazing wood; "far from it. You remember your prophecies before I left, Quinlan?"

"Faith, an' I do. The marriage-card as sure as fate. An' it's turned up, darlin'—rally and truly? Ah, glory be! didn't I always know you'd be in luck? Who is it, Miss Peg honey?"

"Sir Jasper Lustrell."

There was something almost mechanical in the utterance of the name. It seemed as if the full ripe lips had grown tired of speaking it, and the face to which Quinlan's eager eyes were lifted looked pale and fatigued.

"Sir Jasper!" The bellows dropped from the old woman's hands, astonishment and dissatisfaction struggled for expression. "The ould

baronet, him as we thought would niver be marrying again! Shure, 'tis the foine match for yez, miss, barrin' the disparity of age."

Miss Em smiled listlessly. "There's not so very much difference, Quinny; a matter of twenty years or so."

"Well, God's blessin' on yez, darlint, and may ye be happy," said the old woman tenderly. "You'll be holding your head high enough over Mrs. O'Hara now. It's herself that's astonished and envyin' of ye, I'll be sworn."

"What admirable reasons every one seems finding for my choice!" thought Miss Em bitterly. "Did ever bride elect have such odd congratulations?"

She remained standing there, looking thoughtfully at the now blazing fire, while Quinlan fed it with sticks between an endless stream of exclamations, and questions, and good wishes.

"Now sit down, darlint, and rest," she said, rising at last, and noting for the first time how tired and pale Miss Em looked. "I'll soon have the room straight for ye. Not a week since ye left but I've had broom and duster to it."

She wheeled the most comfortable chair to the fire, and Miss Em sank gratefully into its capacious embrace, while the old woman bustled about, slipping off covers and arranging furniture till the room gradually assumed its familiar appearance. By this time it was quite dark, and she went in search of candles and of the errant Bridget, whose aid was needed to convey Miss Em's trunk upstairs.

"There!" she exclaimed, returning successfully from both errands, and lighting two candles on the dressing-table: "Shure, 'tis herself that's just flabbergasted, and gives me up the kays of the store-room as meek as a lamb, and not a word to say whin I told her I'd been after sending Bridget for fowls for dinner. Ye shall have thim in time, Miss Peg dear, and a cup o' tay manetime, for 'tis just dead ye look. Now, don't be botherin' about yer box, I'll come and help ye the minnit I've fixed the fowls for roasting; for there, Bridget's getting the foine cook now, and can see to thim crathurs once they're on the way."

"You needn't have troubled about dinner for me, Quinny. A cup of tea is all I care about."

"And is it to have ye starvin' yerself I'd be, and comin' off a journey too? Faix, I never heard the likes o' that; and if the master isn't for goin' to the wine-cellar and bringin' up his best bottle o' wine to drink luck to yez this blessed night, 'tis meself will be givin' thim the taste o' my tongue, I can promise ye, darlint, and no mistake."

Miss Em sighed wearily. How different it all was to the life of luxury and ease she had left behind! She felt more than ever justified in her choice. She could not have borne this state of things much longer; even the excitement of "rows" would have palled upon her. The penury and mismanagement, the tyranny and discomfort of her stepmother's rule would soon be exchanged for something widely different.

"I did wisely to come here," she thought, looking round the room and noting keenly how shabby and worn was the furniture. "Every day will teach me how much I have to gain, how little to lose."

When Quinlan returned to help unpack, she found her still sitting there in the same attitude, not a trace of its usual energy in the listless figure or the pale tired face. The old woman felt seriously uneasy. She forced her to drink some hot tea, and eat a few morsels of crisp thin toast.

She brought a footstool for her feet, and made up the fire, and drew the curtains, and, leaving the dinner to take its chance under Bridget's charge, she unpacked the trunk that had been so jubilantly filled but a few weeks before.

When everything was arranged in drawers and cupboards to her satisfaction, she looked triumphantly round. "Ye'll be having yer own maid of course, at the castle, Miss Peg, and a grand one I make no doubt; but she won't bring the heart to yer service that I've brought these many years."

"I'm sure of that, Quinny," said Miss Em, rousing herself by an effort, and looking gratefully at the wrinkled face and loving eyes. "There's no friends like the old friends after all; and now, tell me," she added somewhat hurriedly; "is there any news in the village; any one born, or married, or dead?"

Quinlan reflected. "Shure, ye've not been so long away, darlint; and 'tis little time I've had for gossip, what with the mistress ill, and the ructions over thim diamonds, and Bridget that contrairy on account of Tim the postman keepin' company with Mrs. MacShamus's housemaid after as good as promisin' Bridget."

Miss Em moved restlessly in her chair. "The doctor and his wife are well, I suppose? And, by the way, did you ever hear how the old man at Rooklands was going on?"

"Morrison, is it? shure an' he's dead, darlint; didn't ye hear?"

"No—o—!" faltered Miss Em. "Dead, at last! And the money?"

"Left to the son, ivery penny on it. Faix, 'tis he's the rich man now, so they're sayin', and no mistake, though divil a sowl has had sight or wurrd o' him since the buryin', and that was nothing much to spake of; not one of the quality there, and only the darlin' doctor and Denis Morrison himself to follow the hearse."

"But, Quinny!" exclaimed Miss Em eagerly, "surely the mystery is out now?"

The old woman shook her head. "There was no will left, so I've heard. The ould gintleman kept the saycret to the last, and jist handed iverything over to Denis by deed o' gift or some sich contrivance, so the doctor tould me. And 'tis he, Denis Morrison I'm maning, can kape the silent tongue in his head, and manes to do it. But of course ivery one will take notice of him now, without axing questions. Shure, riches is a great power, Miss Peg."

"And he will be rich and owner of Rooklands?" said Miss Em, in a slow mechanical way. "How strange it all seems, after all these years!"

"Now, don't yez be letting yerself think av all thim past troubles, darlint," said the old woman. "Shure, rich or poor, he was never the match for ye, lavin' alone his wildness and wickedness; and proud and glad I am that ye'll be able to show him that. Shure's, 'tis the best day's news I've heard this long time."

"I—I—don't know why I did it!" exclaimed Miss Em suddenly. "I was tired of this life, but perhaps the exchange won't be for the better. Sometimes I hate the thought—Sir Jasper—everything; at others I know it is not only my best chance, but my last."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure o' that, darlint; you've no need to put yerself on the shelf yet awhile. But, shure, never a one in the place will be a better mistress for the castle, and grace her velvets and her jules as ye will."

"I should like it known as soon as possible, Quinny," said Miss Em suddenly and decidedly. "There's no need for secrecy, and it will be very soon—a month from to-day."

"The sooner the better, Miss Peg dear. 'Tis the hard time you always have av it here, and little else but worry and ructions and botherations. Is it to be a grand wedding?"

"It will be one befitting the position, age, and prospects of bride and bridegroom," was the answer.

Quinlan looked at her somewhat doubtfully. "Ye're—ye're not unhappy, or troubled, are yez, darlint?"

"No," replied Miss Em, rising, and pushing back the disarranged hair from a face that belied her words; "not unhappy. I seem to have become numbed to my own identity, that's all. I don't care to look forward—I am afraid to look back. If I could just live on from day to day without thinking—but then I should cease to be human."

The old woman was silent, dimly feeling that something sad and desolate lurked under the reckless words, and conscious, too, of a feeling that prompted her to take the tired, drooping figure in her arms as if she were the child of old, and soothe her with tender words and caresses as she had so often done. But something in the face, the changed aspect, the curious *hardening* and coldness of expression chilled the impulse and kept her silent.

"Can I do anything more for yez, Miss Peg dear?" she asked kindly, with a sudden memory of culinary duties and Bridget.

"No, Quinny, no," said Miss Em, rousing herself with an effort; "I feel quite rested, and I shall change my dress and go downstairs directly. Dinner at seven, I suppose?"

"Yes, me dear. 'Twill be a poor show after what ye've been havin with Lady Moira, but 'deed ye know that's no fault of Mary Quilnan's."

"It's not the dinner, but the long, long, lonely evening," cried Miss Em drearily. "Oh, these evenings, Quinny!"

"Well, 'tis not for long now, darlint. Ye're tired to-night, and that makes yez feel low. But ye'll be all right to-morrow, and ivery one in the place talkin' and congratulatin' ye."

"Oh, yes!"—she laughed bitterly; "I shall be all right to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIX

"HOW SHOULD I GREET THEE"

A FEMININE conclave was assembled in Mrs. MacShamus's drawing-room, and tongues were eager in discussion, sounding various notes of incredulity, wonder, and spite. The subject was not hard to guess.

Miss Em had been but two days at Carrig-duve, and already the trumpet-blast of gossip had sent her name forth coupled with the astonishing announcement that she was to marry Sir Jasper Lustrell.

The extreme unpopularity of Mrs. O'Hara had long barred the gates to visitors, though Mrs. Pigott and Mrs. MacShamus still called at rare intervals; therefore such important personages as the Barringtons and the Markhams could not condescend to the formality of a call, though dying with curiosity to know if the rumour were true or not.

"If any one would know it would be Mrs. MacShamus," was the general decision; and by an odd coincidence the universal curiosity resolved itself into a unanimous call on that lady.



Great was the bridling and tossing of heads when the rumour was pronounced perfectly correct, and the old lady's panegyrics on her favourite declared her good fortune to be well deserved.

The Barrington girls "hoped she would like being tied to a selfish old invalid, who any one could see was only marrying for a nurse." Mrs. Pigott, the rector's wife, trusted that such a union *might* be blessed, but for *her* part she could but consider it *most* unsuitable. Every one knew what an erratic and *peculiar* creature Miss Em was and how flighty she had always been. Of course she *might* settle down now, but *still*——"

An italicised doubt was significant of her own want of faith in any such change for the better, and set tongues wagging in a new direction. "What sort of wedding would it be?" "What *did* Mrs. O'Hara think of it?" "Doubtless she would be glad to get rid of her troublesome step-daughter; they had never agreed, and it was well known the scenes at Carrig-duve had been something fearful." "It was all owing to Miss Em's extravagance that her people had been beggared; indeed, Mrs. O'Hara had once hinted at card debts whose total was simply appalling," and so on, and so on, with that delight in exposing error and ignoring any virtue that redeems it that is so truly characteristic of feminine malice.

Suddenly, into the hubbub of discussion and scandal, entered calm and triumphant the very person who was being discussed. Beautifully dressed, armed *cap-à-pie* for an encounter of which she had been almost certain, and brimming over with enjoyment of the situation, Miss Em "took the room," so to speak, with a dignity there was no denying.

Even the armed neutrality of Mrs. Pigott was not proof against her radiant graciousness; and though the conversation at first dealt merely with generalities, it was not long before the great subject was introduced, and the assembly found itself offering congratulations of the customary stereotyped form. Miss Em received them with the self-possession of a sovereign accepting her just rights. She neither looked conscious nor foolish. Her soon-to-be acquired honours seemed to fit her naturally and easily; and not the most daring of her traducers could throw in a hint at the unsuitability of the union they had just been lamenting.

"The marriage was to be soon; almost too soon for her taste," Miss Em announced; "but Sir Jasper wished it, and there was really no reason for opposing his wishes. Molly also was desirous that her stepmother should be at the castle with as little delay as possible. So sweet of her, you know," Miss Em went on with a glance at the discomfited faces. "She welcomes me quite as a sister, and I certainly prefer the *rôle* to that of stepmother. Indeed, the one objection I had to accepting Sir Jasper arose chiefly from the fact of his possessing a grown-up daughter, but their *joint* entreaties overruled my scruples at last."

"*Her* scruples indeed!" thought the rector's wife. "Fine scruples they must have been! Angling with all her arts for that foolish old man, and pretending it was *he* who wanted to marry her. I call it disgusting."

By way of emphasising her feelings she rose abruptly, and bade a hurried good-bye to her hostess and the assembly in general. It was singular that the said assembly immediately made a unanimous discovery as to the lateness of the hour, and the necessity for getting to their respective homes. There was a stir and bustle, a stormy rustling of skirts, an interchange of rapid remarks and farewells; and then Miss Em found herself sole occupant of the drawing-room, Mrs MacShamus having accompanied

her nieces to the hall door, to see that the delicate and neuralgic Minnie was safely shawled and wrapped against the effect of the chilly evening air.

When a man is left alone he generally thinks of a cigar, and lets his hand stray fondly to his coat pocket. A woman in the first exigencies of solitude looks round for a mirror. Miss Em, catching a vision of becoming head-gear in the glass over the mantel-shelf, marched straight towards it, and took in the flattering reflection with no small pride.

Her toilette that afternoon had cost her an infinitude of thought and care. She well knew the keen eyes that would vivisect her appearance, and every detail had been studied in order to make the whole a success.

Resting one foot on the fender, she stood looking at herself as critically as her severest judge could have done, and so absorbed was she in the study that the sound of male voices scarcely aroused her.

"Only the doctor, I suppose," she thought, as the door opened. She did not alter her position, but kept her eyes on the mirror. The figure in the doorway was reflected there; and her gaze, at first so indifferent, flashed on it a look of terror, while the colour rushed from cheek and lips, leaving a white frozen face that bore little likeness to the glowing life and warmth at which she had been gazing a moment before.

Slowly, uncertainly, as if compelled against her will, she turned, and for an instant's space the advancing and the motionless figure faced each other. A quick breath, the sounding of a name, a hurried recognition, and then as hurried a shrinking back. She noted it all while summoning to her aid every power of concealment, and every sign of indifference of which her own face and voice were capable.

"Mr.—Morrison, I believe? How do you do? It is so many years since we met I scarcely believed you would recognise me."

"That's not true," answered the stranger roughly; "even in the dark street that winter night I knew you at once. Men haven't such short memories as women, thank God!"

There was a certain *brusquerie* and roughness about him that broke down her more delicate fencing without scruple. It frightened and yet pleased her. The colour stole warmly back to her face; in the dim light of the room she looked strangely young and attractive to those fierce wild eyes that swept over her so boldly.

"How little you've changed!" he said at last. "In all these years too! Why, I'm an old man—look!"

He raised his hand and swept the thick hair back from his brow. She saw it was quite grey.

"I suppose you've heard about my luck," he went on abruptly, "if it deserves to be called that. I daresay it sounds odd to say I was sorry for the old man, and yet I was. Not that I had much to thank him for while he lived. And when I'd money enough of my own without his, of course it was thrown at my head."

"Wealth is a good thing," said Miss Em carelessly, as she seated herself on the couch; "very few people complain of having too much of it. Do you intend to settle down at Rooklands?"

"Yes," he said; "I do. I've no particular affection for my native place, but I owe it a grudge which I'm going to pay off in my own fashion, and in a manner it least expects."

She had no time to ask or hear more, for at this moment the doctor came bustling in, having heard from his wife that Miss Em was in the

drawing-room. His sharp eyes glanced from one to the other as he shook hands with her, and bade Denis Morrison take a chair; but he could read nothing in either of their faces to give any clue to the feelings this unexpected meeting might have aroused.

"I suppose," he said, "I needn't go through the form of introducing you, though it must be, dear me—ten—fifteen, or more, years since you left us, Denis. Faith, time flies in these Sleepy Hollows of villages. One year's so like another there's nothing to mark or take count of."

"It's a long time," said Denis Morrison thoughtfully.

"Long enough for friends, foes, and feuds, to be buried and forgotten," remarked Miss Em, with a swift look that was as swiftly averted.

"I never forget," he said curtly.

"A bad habit," laughed the doctor, "and mighty inconvenient too. Never make memory a storehouse if you want to get any happiness out of life."

"I never did expect—that," was the answer. "It's never shown a particularly pleasant face to me, or fulfilled any promise it made."

"Well, well; we all find fault with it more or less," said the doctor good-humouredly; "and I suppose we'd do just the same if we had our own way of it. We are all faint-hearts when duty is disagreeable, and giants when it's pleasant. However, you've no need to complain of luck now, Morrison. The 'long lane' has had a particularly pleasant turning for you."

"One can only value money for what it brings, not its own sake. I've yet to discover whether mine will purchase anything worth having."

"You'll be hard to please, if it doesn't," said Dr. MacShamus, with a keen glance at the square sun-browned face and well-knit figure. How strong and handsome and self-reliant he looked! The mere boyish beauty of youth had been replaced by the stern moulding of manhood. Strong passions and strong will might still struggle for mastery, but the will would gain the victory over the passions, if physiognomy was to be believed.

It seemed to Miss Em that every line and look of that altered face had fastened upon her memory in one brief glance. Outwardly calm and indifferent, her every pulse was throbbing and thrilling to remembered happiness. The passage of Time seemed brief as a dream; a fresh sweet current of life flowed in her veins. Hope, re-baptised, lent itself to strange imaginings.

"He is so changed. We are both so much wiser and older. Why should we not be friends? I like that strong, steadfast look of his; he was always masterful, but now one feels it would not be for the mere sake of tyranny he would seek to bend one to his will, but simply because that will was best. And he has not forgotten—how strange it seems! Twenty years of absence, hardship, knocking about the world, and yet to remember *one year* that antedated it all."

The doctor's voice broke across the current of her thoughts and stemmed the advancing tide of sentiment by a rough barrier of facts.

"I was going up to Carrig-duve," he said, "this evening. You mustn't think the worse of me for being a bit behind with my good wishes. Faith, Miss Em, you've given us all a surprise, and a welcome one too. My old lady has been just off her head with delight since she heard it. Divil a word of sense have I got out of her these two days."

Miss Em started, recalled to prose and actuality.

"I—I suppose you were surprised," she said, her face slightly averted from the keen blue eyes that had suddenly questioned its composure.

"Well, I've made it a rule not to be surprised at anything," answered the doctor, rubbing his hands together in a cheery fashion; "but I must confess this rather proved an exception. I'm glad we're not losing you, though. I was afraid it would be an Englishman when you *did* make up your mind."

"Oh no, I'm true to my country, with all its faults. But where's Mrs. MacShamus, doctor? I've scarcely had a word with her, and I must be going home directly."

"Faith, and if you think we're going to let you off like that you're mightily mistaken," answered the doctor. "You'll just stay the evening now you *are* here. 'Twill be time enough to be giving us the go by when you're Lady Lustrell, but I won't hear of it before."

There was a slight nervous movement of the figure in the adjoining chair, but no comment broke the silence following these last words, and the entrance of Mrs. MacShamus was a welcome interruption to the feeling of restraint that seemed to have seized upon them all.

"They've gone at last," she said. "What an odd thing that I've been weeks without a soul to see me, and then they all fix upon the same day! Now, Miss Em dear, come and take your bonnet off, for I am not going to part with you yet. Mr. Morrison, won't you stay too and have a cup of tea with us? I'm sure it's very lonely for you up at the big house now."

Denis Morrison rose abruptly.

"You're very kind, but I can't stay to-night. I've some business to attend to. Indeed, I drove in to meet the lawyer and take him back."

"The Dublin train is due in ten minutes, I'm sorry to say," observed the doctor.

"I know. I shall only just get to the station in time, so I'll say good-bye at once."

He shook hands with them all. There was no discernible shade of difference in the manner of his doing so. Perhaps Miss Em had expected that there would be; but the careless touch and mechanical "good-bye" conveyed nothing—neither remembrance, nor regret, nor reproach.

* * * * *

The excitement of whist with a dummy, followed by shilling nap, failed to arouse any great interest in Miss Em. She tried her best to return the doctor's cheery jests and jokes as to her forthcoming marriage with her old gaiety of manner, and to gossip over Dublin folk and Dublin news, as if she enjoyed the subjects under discussion; but she alone knew how much of *effort* was concerned in doing it all, and how the emotions so well controlled began to resent the unprofitable strain put upon them.

She left early, trying in vain to avoid the doctor's proffered escort; but he was inexorable, declaring the future Lady Lustrell to be a person of vast importance, for whose welfare he felt in a measure responsible.

The way seemed interminable; she longed with every fibre of her being for solitude and silence, and it seemed as if they were never to be hers. The one subject about which her thoughts hovered was the one which the doctor avoided; and, for once, a sense of dread that was almost cowardice prompted her from bringing it forward.

Besides, what could it matter to her now?

Long years ago two paths had diverged so widely that they could

never join again. If absence had been powerless against memory it was equally powerless against the barrier those years of severance had erected.

"I never thought we should meet again," said Feminine self-deception.

"You hoped it, always," said Truth sternly.

The duet lasted with persevering monotony throughout that walk.

It sounded even through the cheery strains of the doctor's farewell words. Its echoes floated through the dreary hall of Carrig-duve, and entering the silent house refused to be shut out even when the welcome solitude of her own room at last closed around Miss Em.

CHAPTER XX

"IF SORROW HAS TAUGHT ME ANYTHING"

SWIFTLY enough the days and weeks flew by, each lessening in its flight that cherished liberty of spinsterhood so dear to Miss Em's heart.

Latterly she had thrown herself with almost feverish recklessness into the preparations for her marriage, and, to use Mrs. O'Hara's expression, was bent on "turning the whole house upside down." Carrig-duve awoke from its long spell of lonely quiet, and burst forth into bustle and noise and confusion. New servants rioted in the kitchen and drove Mrs. O'Hara wild with extravagant demands; rooms were prepared for guests; the sound of broom and brush and pail was an hourly annoyance to the sordid mistress of the house; carpets and curtains long laid by in store-room or cupboard were unearthed, and returned to their respective uses, and, when all was completed, the old mansion looked as for years it had not ventured to look, and Miss Em at last declared herself satisfied.

Mrs. O'Hara might groan in spirit, but for once she had to submit to the will of husband and step-daughter. The dignity of the O'Haras demanded certain forms and ceremonies, and her only consolation was that it was for the last time. Once the obnoxious "Emilia" was out of the way and safely married, there would be no one to interfere with her penurious designs, and a future of rigorous economy might in some measure atone for present useless extravagance.

Lady Patricia and her maid arrived two days before the wedding, and Miss Bedelia on the previous evening; Molly, who was the only bridesmaid, had also come over that day, and was to sleep at Carrig-duve so as to be ready for the important ceremony next morning.

The dinner-party, arranged by Miss Em, consisted of these three guests, Sir Jasper and his nephew, Dr. and Mrs. MacShamus, and Charley Warren, the cousin of the Barrington girls.

The shabby old dining-room looked wonderful in the soft glow of lamp-light and candles; the napery and glass and silver would have done credit to the castle itself; and Miss Em had wisely decided on simplicity and excellence, instead of profusion, in drawing out the *menu*, with the result that cooking and service were beyond reproach.

Mr. O'Hara seemed to have taken a fresh lease of life, and glowed and beamed on his guests from the head of the well-appointed table, as had been his wont in days of old when Carrig-duve had been renowned for hospitality and style. Miss Em herself looked radiant. She was dressed

in black lace, a few of the famous diamonds sparkling amidst its dusky softness. Excitement lent brilliance to her grey eyes and flushed her cheek, and whatever of art had been called into requisition to efface the marks of time, had at least, the merit of doing its duty, and offending neither eye nor taste by obvious advertisement.

Every one seemed in excellent spirits. Molly was seated by Paddy Kearney and was blissfully ignorant of all or everything besides that fact; Lady Pat was entertaining Mr. O'Hara; Sir Jasper was politely attentive to his hostess, while observant of his *fiancée*, who sat between the doctor and Charley Warren; while Mrs. MacShamus and Miss Bedelia discussed recipes and domestic grievances and changes in Ireland, with a zest that was only secondary to their enjoyment of the excellent dinner itself.

Once or twice some thought of the morrow flashed across Miss Em's memory, and she caught her breath with a sudden spasm of fear that banished the jest on her tongue or the laugh on her lip. Once or twice her eyes met those coldly watchful eyes of the man so soon to be her husband; and the dislike and fear, coiled about her heart like a dreaming snake, would begin to wake and stir with a sense of apprehension. But the old reckless spirit soon re-asserted itself, and banished the dread and mocked at the repugnance.

She was not of the type of whom female slaves are made; and while she studied Sir Jasper, recognising all the good "points" of the stately figure, the clear-cut features, the austere elegance of dress and appearance, she was inwardly resolving to preserve her own independence intact from the outset of matrimonial life, and to mark out with accurate distinctness the road she intended to take.

When the ladies withdrew and were seated in the drawing-room, Miss Bedelia approached her niece with some ceremony and handed her a morocco case, with the announcement that it was her wedding-gift. Miss Em opened it and disclosed a set of emeralds and diamonds reposing on a bed of white velvet. An exclamation of delight escaped her, and Lady Pat and Molly echoed it as she turned towards them with the open case in her hand.

"They'll become you well," said Miss Bedelia, "and they'll not make a bad show when you wear them along with your own diamonds. The mistress of Castle Lustrell will need jewels, and, indeed, 'tis a pity that so many of the O'Hara diamonds are gone out of the family. Well do I remember your poor mother when she wore them at the Lord Lieutenant's ball the first year she was married."

She sighed and glanced around the great shabby drawing-room. "Ah, many's the change since then," she murmured regretfully.

The sigh that emphasised her words and the glance that marked them fired Mrs. O'Hara's already smouldering wrath to bursting-point.

"Indeed, Miss O'Hara," she exclaimed, "the changes you speak of are only the results of family follies. It's hard work I've had trying to repair the fortune that was being wasted in riotous living and senseless extravagance!"

"Riotous living!" exclaimed Miss Bedelia, firing up in defence of the family honour; "and pray, ma'am, what do *you* know of how a good old family should live or behave, or keep up the traditions of its race? I'd have you know that no O'Hara yet was ever guilty of meanness, or hadn't bed and board for the friend who needed them, Carrig-duve was

something to be proud of in those days, let me tell you. But there, there, what's the use to speak of it? Alien blood can't understand what Irish hospitality meant in the old times that are gone."

"It meant drunkenness and wantoning; it meant beggary and shame for those that came after; it meant debt and disorder and disgrace!" cried Mrs. O'Hara furiously. "Don't talk to me of your good old families. Ireland has only them to thank for its present condition of destitution and misrule. Better live on bread and cheese and be *honest* and pay your debts, than keep up a show of extravagance, and be liberal with other people's money!"

"Oh, pray don't begin that old argument," interposed Miss Em hastily. "We are never likely to agree, and surely it's time to bury the hatchet at last. Talking of the past won't alter it or mend the future either. Come, Aunt Bedelia," and she put her hand on the irate spinster's arm and drew her aside, "you promised to tell me your new recipe for curry," she gently insinuated. "I'd be glad to know of it, for Molly tells me the cook at Castle Lustrell is not famous for novelties."

Miss Bedelia was mollified, and consented to impart the valuable knowledge her niece desired. "But don't be after telling *her* how to do it," she added as a caution. "The economy of the thing would be its virtue in her eyes. When folks *are* mean, you can't expect them to go against the grain, and the saving of an ounce of butter or a single egg would make Mrs. O'Hara happy for a month."

This was so true that Miss Em laughed. "Don't you wonder at all—this?" she asked, with a comprehensive wave of the hand. "A fine battle I had, I can tell you! But I was determined to leave the old place with credit, and I simply took the law into my own hands, ordered in servants and everything that was necessary, and declared I'd borrow the money from Sir Jasper if she wouldn't let my father pay; that shamed her, I think."

"I'm surprised *that* was possible," said Miss Bedelia with an acrimonious glance at the lady in question. "Has she treated herself to a new gown for to-morrow?" she added abruptly.

"Oh no!" laughed Miss Em; "that would be the height of extravagance! She has had her green silk altered a little, and is going to wear that."

"Green? why, 'tis the most unlucky colour she could wear at a wedding."

"Perhaps that's why she selected it. After all, what does it matter? It's not I who am going to wear it."

"I hope you'll be happy, my dear," said Miss Bedelia warmly. "You've waited long, but you've made an excellent choice at last. 'Tis a fine position, and Sir Jasper's none so old but that he'll make a very creditable husband. And now tell me all about the *trousseau*; I am sorry not to have seen it. I hear that muslin insertion and fine tucks are so much used, and——"

"Yes, yes," interposed Miss Em; "I've had the very latest fashion, and a dozen of everything. I'll show you my dress by-and-by, if you'll come up to my room. I was determined to be married in my travelling-gown; it saves two toilets and—and is more suitable," she added hurriedly.

"What's the colour?" asked Miss Bedelia.

"Chestnut brown silk, and I've a travelling-cloak of cloth to match,

for going away in, and a plain felt hat. I—I don't want to be taken for a bride."

"I quite understand, and your taste is always excellent," said Miss Bedelia. "Shall you be away long?"

"I hope to goodness—not!" exclaimed Miss Em with a passionate vehemence that startled her questioner. "I—I mean I'd rather be home and settled down; I'm tired of knocking about, and it's so long since I've known what a house of my own is like."

"I can well believe that," said Miss Bedelia, with a vindictive glance at her enemy, who was sitting by the fireplace in sulky dignity, exchanging occasional frigid remarks with Lady Pat. "It's but a poor place this has been for many a long year. However, my dear, you've a bright and prosperous future before you, and that will make amends for all you've had to put up with. Ah, here come the gentlemen. I must have a few words with Sir Jasper; 'tis very proud I am of the connection, I assure you, my dear child, and not a bit regretful that you've waited so long now you've done so well at last."

"*Done so well!*" echoed Miss Em bitterly; "have I indeed done so well? If they only knew what I feel, to-night!"

The party broke up early, for Sir Jasper had a long drive before him, and there was a certain restraint and strangeness upon them all that nothing seemed to disperse and for which no one could account.

Perhaps it originated with Miss Em, whose spirits seemed to flag suddenly, as if the effort to keep up was beyond her. Mrs. O'Hara was sulky and silent, and Lady Pat had hard work to "keep the ball rolling" and entertain the circle generally. But even she felt it was a relief when the guests of the evening departed, and the house party were free to seek their respective chambers. She lingered for a moment on the threshold of Miss Em's door, as if half expectant of an invitation to enter; but it was a very white tired face that turned itself apologetically to her, and very tremulous lips that murmured, "Good-night."

Lady Pat kissed her warmly. "I can see you are done up," she said. "Promise me you'll go to bed and try to sleep at once. Don't sit up *thinking*, whatever you do."

The door closed. A haggard, weary woman stood alone in the room that from childhood had been so familiar to her. Her eyes glanced from one object to another, insignificant enough to strangers, but full of unconscious eloquence to herself; full of the life and sunshine and prattle of harmless innocent days; full also of a wider meaning as childhood reached the golden borderland of youth; then, touched with deeper significance by the hand of Time, speaking of weary vigils kept here; of griefs spent, yet unforgotten; of sorrows drifting hither and thither like clouds in a brooding sky, settling at last in one heavy mass to break and spend themselves in stormy warfare.

Long and deep was that spell of silence.

The sounds in the house hushed one by one, and the solitude and stillness shut in that motionless figure as a wall may entomb life. She was back in the past of happy years; a girl dreaming a girl's fancies, hoping a girl's hope, idealising a girl's idyls, trusting with a girl's innocent faith.

So small and weak a thing in a world so vast and cruel! A thing to be moulded by Fate, to be the sport of circumstance, to look back on a life so different from what hope and intention had purposed it should be, that

she could scarcely recognise in the woman of forty one point of resemblance to the girl of eighteen.

Thought brought her back gradually to the present hour, yet seemed to flash with sickening suddenness upon her long dream of "what had been." She started and moved slowly across the room, impelled by some irresistible power to unlock that storehouse of events, suggestions, possibilities, which had held the treasures of her vanished youth, and was now but the charnel-house of memory. Once more the book was in her hand; the fluttering leaves breathed forth their story, faint with the perfume of dead summers, dim as colours sun-dried and for ever unmatchable because of that fact, at once a blemish and a beauty.

Page after page was rapidly scanned; tear-blotted scrawls, hurried entries, long rhapsodies clearly written, sparkling with fun and humour, brimful of youth's light-heartedness. Heavy tears fell slowly on the last page. The eyes that shed them looked back at their own reflection and read there the sequel to that girlish story. Every line of the altered face emphasised its shame and sorrow. Past and present stood side by side in the quiet darkness and pointed warningly to the future. For the years change but our outward form, they do not change ourselves. As we were, we are. Modified or hardened perhaps by life's hard bondage, but still recognisable to our own inner sight, even as the design of the artist is visible to himself through its faulty embodiment of workmanship.

The candles had almost burnt themselves out. Midnight had long since sounded its note of warning when the solitary occupant of the darkening room at last roused herself.

She looked irresolutely at the thick volume in her hand and then at the grate where the last gleams of firelight flickered amongst grey ashes.

"I ought to destroy it," she said to herself. "On the threshold of a new life it is best to have done with the old, and women's secrets are so easily twisted into sins."

She moved slowly towards the fireplace, and stood there holding the book, her fingers trembling on the pages she was nerving herself to tear out.

Suddenly there sounded in the stillness a soft yet imperative tap, as of some one knocking at the window from without.

She started. Her face, grey with terror, turned itself in the direction from whence the noise came. The book dropped from her hand to the floor, and there lay unheeded. Once again the knock was repeated, louder and more imperative. She crossed the room and drew up the blind, but started back with a faint scream of terror as she caught sight of a face pressed against the window.

The outer hasp was turned, and a figure stepped from the little stone balcony into the dimly lighted room.

"Don't scream, for God's sake . . . I won't stay five minutes, but speak to you I must. You wouldn't answer my letter, and I've haunted the village till I'm sick of every shop and shanty that it holds! But I swore I'd see you once again before—before you married that old fool! Peg, don't look as if I were a murderer. I'm only desperate. Will you listen?"

CHAPTER XXI

A BRIDAL EVE

"I WILL listen," said Miss Em.

She drew herself up to her full height, and moved a few steps away from the intruder. Her courage had returned. Her eyes looked at him without fear, despite the pallor of face and lips. The dim light accentuated her whiteness, as throat and neck and arms gleamed from out the dusky lace of her evening gown.

The unexpectedness and risk of the situation appealed to that *bizarre* element in her nature, unaffected by the passage of years, though toned down from youth's recklessness by exigencies of circumstance and surroundings. She was ready to listen to any appeal, though perfectly conscious of its uselessness. The man, on the other hand, felt his courage evaporating before that steady glance, that frigid dignity. The words that had been thronging to his lips were suddenly arrested, but the eyes meeting in mute challenge said much.

"Are you going to explain your reason for this intrusion?" asked that clear ringing voice, whose modulated tones had once held all life's music for his ears.

"Reason!" he cried impetuously. "God knows I have enough, or I wouldn't have come here *now*, Peg. Why didn't you answer my letter as I begged?"

"What was the use?" she said coldly. "The past is over and done with—buried in its grave of misery. Do you think I would stir a finger to open that grave—*now*? I have little to thank you for, Denis Morrison; but, at least, I can prevent you from repeating that mistake."

"I asked you to let me repair it."

The white face flushed with a sudden hot glow.

"Yes!" she said in a stifled voice, broken and jarred, like strings too roughly handled; "you *dared* do that. And you failed to read my answer in silence."

"I wanted a reason. I could not believe you had changed so utterly. We are both free now. I told you the truth when I said I had never forgotten you. I never have. A man may have a hundred fancies in his life. He loves once. I always loved you, even when I——"

"When you did your best to ruin my whole life!" she interposed. "Even when you took advantage of ignorance and recklessness, and fanned the flame of my mad love for you by every art a man possesses. And you had everything to help you! Hereditary impulses, my defenceless youth, the utter loneliness and unprotectedness of my life. God forgive you, Denis! You knew what you were doing. I did not. I neither thought nor cared. For your sake I made a moral shipwreck of that life, and it left me the woman I have become."

"The past is dead, Peg. You said so yourself. Don't rake up these memories. I was a bad fellow, I know; but think of my bringing up, my position, the daily humiliations that were my lot, the temptations I met with—and then—oh, how I loved you, Peg! God! how I loved you! Even now, when I think of it, I could do the same again for a smile or a word. And you gave more than *that*—Peg. Your love was as generous

as your nature. Surely you can't have altered so much. Something of that girl must linger in your heart, even as something of the boy who worshipped you lingers in mine. Our pulses haven't grown chill yet; your eyes are still eloquent for me. Oh, Peg, come back! Don't do this rash thing. I can give you wealth now. I am no longer a penniless adventurer. The world is wide, we can make our home where we will. Life needn't cheat us out of happiness. Some good years are still left. We can reconquer our past joys and renew them. We——"

"Never!"

Brief words sometimes tell a long history. That one word told revelation, confession, despair. She said no more, only sank slowly down on the low cane chair beside her, and covered her face from sight with shuddering arms on which the diamonds sparkled mockingly, like evil eyes rejoicing over human woe.

He looked at her.

A woman whose best years were spent and over; a woman for whom life held no single illusion, who had tasted the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge even as he himself had done—more sparingly perhaps, but with equal avidity, and to whom the knowledge thus acquired was as distasteful now as it had been desirable—once.

"Do you mean that?" he asked hoarsely. "Once before you sent me from you—sent me rolling down the hill of evil at the devil's own pace. You know what Irish recklessness is, Peg; we both had a fair share of it in those days, I think. I have spent my life in unsatisfied longing; no woman but you has ever contented me. I come to you to-night wasted with the famine of long desire. I come to you with a *right* which you must acknowledge, the right which says, 'Remember.'"

The passionate appeal of his glance swept over her bent head, but the motionless figure made no sign. He came nearer and knelt at her side.

"Listen—it is for the last time. If I leave you to-night it is to go to worse than death. I've been *driven* to you despite my efforts, despite myself, Peg. Why are you going to marry this man? He is not a good man, though, God knows, I'd be the last to throw stones at any one. He's only giving you the dregs of a selfish sensualist's life. I can offer you something better than *that*!"

She lifted her head.

"Can you offer me an honourable name?" she said. "Can you offer me one pure, good feeling for which I loved you once?"

A sullen flush rose to his brow.

"No," he said; "but such as I am you made me."

"And such as *I* am you made *me*! If I am content to accept the dregs of this man's life, I, at least, know the worthlessness of what I give in exchange."

"Is that your final answer?"

"It is; I wonder you *dared* to ask another."

Their eyes met with a flash of defiance. It was mortal combat between two natures alike in their very dissimilarity. Hot youth spoke out again, and all the intervening years were swept aside, as a storm-blast rents an insufficient barrier. They had loved to madness once; such love cannot awake again for any prayer. What a woman suffers at a man's hands he dimly recognises in such a moment as this!

Slowly Denis Morrison rose to his feet. His last hope was vanishing,

going down, down, down into deep waters, from whence resurrection was impossible. He had thought to find some trace of the girl in the woman to whom he had appealed; but there was none, so he felt, or so she chose to make him feel.

For a moment he stood there, and life seemed to pause and then die slowly out of pulse and vein, leaving him blind, and dumb, and deaf. Then sharp pain stirred his heart, and the past and the present turned their veiled faces towards him. "What have you made of us, you two mad, human things?" they seemed to ask; and the dreary silence echoed the mocking laugh that was their only answer.

The cold night wind blew in through the opening window, stirring the laces of the woman's dress, and chilling with damp breath her bare arms and throat.

She raised her head. Her eyes followed the vanishing figure, as, with one hand resting on the stone balustrade, it turned towards her in a last appeal. Even in that dim light the eyes seemed to burn her with remembered shame, and sorrow, and sweetness, all commingled in one magic memory.

She did not move. Not the tremor of an eyelash, or the flutter of uplifted hand signalled him to linger, or delay.

Love was dead.

Into the cold darkness of the dying night he took it forth, to bury it where youth and hope and all fair things of life were buried too.

* * * * *

Strained to a certain point feeling becomes numbness. A passive quiescence takes the place of pain, and torture spends itself in faint recurrent throbs instead of useless agony.

Miss Em rose to her feet as the snap of the window proclaimed itself closed. The fire had sunk to a heap of grey ashes, the candles were flickering in their sockets. A white, haggard face looked at her from the mirror, the eyes darkly circled, the lips closed in a hard line. "What a face to greet one's bridal morn!" she thought.

With one long shuddering sigh she took in every detail of herself. Then a swift breath extinguished the candle's flickering light, and in the darkness of the room came only the sound of a woman's broken sobs.

* * * * *

The day broke rosy and fair, and the warm sunlight stole into the chamber and flickered to and fro, playing hide and seek with the jewels on bare arms, and kissing the dead whiteness of a face that sleep at last had tranquillised.

With a sudden start the sleeper woke and gazed with wonder at her strange appearance.

She had thrown herself dressed as she was on the bed, and had fallen asleep in sheer weariness.

She rose now, and with hurried fingers removed her diamonds and unlaced her dress, and went through all the old hateful routine which night and morn render compulsory for civilised beings, be they ever so weary, or ever so sad.

Then she crept back to bed, cold and faint and unutterably wretched, vainly wooing sleep again.

She watched the light grow brighter at that fatal window, and the

glow seemed to scorch her brain. The dingy pattern of the carpet, the ornaments on the mantel-shelf, the hundred and one commonplace and remembered things that were sacred to her own possession seemed to take a new aspect and grow vivid in an atmosphere of regret.

Time ticked its slow course from the little china clock, and every moment brought nearer the fatal hour when she must nerve herself to dress and smile and play her part in the dreary pageant of the day.

"Why have I done this?" she asked herself. "I had grown used to my life. Better have left it as it was, not taken a new burden by way of lightening the old. But all my days seem to have been spent in committing mistakes and regretting them too late. I can't escape now. What a ghastly mockery it would have been to do what *he* prayed last night; to try to retrieve the youth he murdered, to let him for ever contrast the woman in her faded bloom with the girl whose love he so little valued! Oh! how I remember it all; that is the worst of women, or such a woman as I am. I *can't* forget; I remember his words, his kisses, the very way he used to look at me across a room; the mad wild things he would do and say. And after all what does it come to? What does any man's love ever come to when the novelty has worn off? Satiety, weariness, regret! Oh! how could he have *dared* to come to me last night; it was a worse insult even than——"

Her thoughts broke off abruptly. "I hope I shall never see him again. I thought I had outlived his power to hurt me. . . . Will he go away again? He did not say. Oh! he must, he *must*. It is too horrible that he should be here, at my gates almost, waiting to see me that old man's wife. Oh! I think I've been mad. God is very cruel to me. He doesn't let me *feel* old! He doesn't put chill calm into my soul and let me take life easily as others do. It's always been like this to me. I mean to do right, but then, somehow, the right turns out to be all wrong. They say nothing is so bad but that it *can* be worse. I wonder if anything, *anything* could be worse to me than what I am doing? I can't imagine it—now."

She closed her eyes and lay there very quiet.

"The pain is lulling at last," she murmured faintly. "It seems only like a bad dream. I—I haven't prayed for a long, long time, but I could pray now with all my soul that God would let me get through this day as if last night had never been. Oh! how shall I ever face the cruel light—the cruel eyes of women? Among them all is there one who would be sorry if she knew me as I am, as I know myself, as—to my lasting misery—that one man knows me?"

CHAPTER XXII

AFTERWARDS

"SHURE, 'twas an illigant ceremony intirely, and went off beautiful," said Quinlan, wiping her eyes with a corner of her muslin apron and appealing to Miss Bedelia as a "kindred soul" after the excitement of the day. "And Miss Peg, the saints presarve her, that composed and grand-looking, not the highest in the land could bate her an they tried. Yet she was feelin' it all the time. I saw the lips of her quiver when they was speechifying at the breakfast, and only for the high spirit that was always in her she'd have let the tears rowl down her face, instead of houlding

thim back in thim beautiful eyes. Arrah! wisha, wisha. Miss O'Hara, 'tis a sorry day for me to be losin' the likes o' her."

"Perhaps she'll engage you at the castle, Quinlan," said Miss Bedelia. "You know 'twas an old promise as a girl that whenever she married you should go to her new home."

"Do ye think that I'm after forgetting that, Miss O'Hara, ma'am? Faith, an' it's kept the heart o' me from brakin' outright entirely, entirely, all this holy and blessed day. And yet the master here has need o' me. 'Twill be fairly starved he'll be after all this to make up for the extravagance, and ivery crust and candle-end counted. Faith, 'tis a taste of purgatory we get here whin Miss Peg, bless her, is out of the way."

Miss Bedelia smiled grimly. Mrs. O'Hara was no favourite of hers, and she was prepared to believe anything that was ill of her. Besides, Quinlan had the privileges of an old servant and an Irish servant to boot, and there was nothing derogatory in a gossip with her.

The conversation was taking place in Miss Bedelia's room, whither she had inveigled Quinlan on the plea of needing her assistance in packing.

She was always eager to "shake off the dust" of Carrig-duve from her shoes, and never by any chance stayed a day longer than was absolutely necessary.

"It was a sorry day for the family when my brother married an Englishwoman," she remarked at last. "I have often wondered why my niece didn't marry long ago, if only to escape from here. It certainly was not from any want of offers."

"Offers, indeed! Why, 'twas the pick of the county Miss Peg had to choose a husband from. And 'tis a quare choice she's made, after all," she added regretfully. "Not but what the position is foine enough, though they do say Sir Jasper's none so well off as he'd make folks believe."

Miss Bedelia started. "Is that true, Quinlan? I always understood he was so wealthy."

"Was, ma'am, that's thrue for ye. But I've heard tell o' mortgages and sich like; and you know yerself, Miss O'Hara dear, that the land isn't worth a quarter what it was, even tin years ago. And, shure, Sir Jasper's not the gintleman to be denyin' himself anything he's a mind for. Och! glory be to God, poor Ireland's in a moighty quare way intirely, intirely, and 'tis the landed gentry know where the shoe pinches!"

Miss Bedelia still looked thoughtful. The doubt thrown out by Quinlan's words was likely to be a pebble of uneasiness in the shoe of that future comfort she had promised herself. She had looked upon Miss Em's future as secure at last, and silenced a little conscience prick of her own with the inward assurance that her money would never be needed *now*. However, after a few moments' consideration she decided that all this could only be village gossip, and had probably no real foundation. Emilia surely knew what she was about, and would have been the last woman in the world to marry without assuring herself she had all she bargained for.

She changed the subject abruptly, and set Quinlan off on a fresh recital of the sins and shortcomings of Mrs. O'Hara, while she folded skirts, and shook out laces, and arranged all Miss Bedelia's belongings with a view to getting the maximum of articles into the minimum of space.

In the midst of her work Quinlan suddenly started.

"Faith, and I'm jost forgettin' the very thing I promised Miss Peg!"

she exclaimed. "Axin' yer pardon, ma'am, Miss O'Hara dear, ye'll jest excuse me for a moment, whilst I give a look round her room. She's that careless, bless her sowl, and I tould her I'd be givin' a squint round to see if she'd left anything behind. For 'tis she knows as well as meself, the pryin' eyes that are in *this* house. So I'll jest—arraah whist! . . . Was that her door I'm after hearin'?"

She went eagerly to the door of Miss Bedelia's room and looked out. A moment after she turned round.

"Well, ma'am, it's a quare thing," she said slowly, "but I'd be sworn I saw the tail of a gown whiskin' round the corner this minnit, and, more beyant, I know *whose* gown it was. Now what had the mistress to do pryin' into Miss Peg's room at all, tell me that?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Miss Bedelia. "But there's nothing wonderful in it, Quinlan; maybe she only wanted to see that Emilia hadn't forgotten anything."

Quinlan shook her head disapprovingly. "No, ma'am. She's after no good, and why did she slink away like that as if she'd been caught thavin' or worse? I'll jest go and look for meself if the drawers is locked and her boxes sthropped, as I promised. If there's one left open divil a bit but I know who's been at it."

She left, and Miss Bedelia followed her.

Tidiness was never Miss Em's strong point, and the aspect of her room on this eventful occasion was a few degrees more chaotic than usual. Quinlan cast sharp glances about her as she moved to and fro gathering up various articles of apparel, and endeavouring to "straighten" the disordered apartment. The window was open, and Miss Bedelia approached it, and stood for a few seconds looking out at the garden below, and the waving boughs of the great elm where they rustled against the low stone balustrade of the little balcony. The air was soft and spring-like, the branches as they swayed to and fro almost touched the window by which she stood. Her eyes carelessly roving over the scene were suddenly conscious of a momentary arrest—something slight and trivial, and yet destined to haunt her with a pertinacity almost irritating.

"Come here, Quinlan," she said at last.

The old woman approached and stood by her side, as if waiting for explanation of the summons.

"Look there," Miss Bedelia continued presently; "tell me—do you notice anything *peculiar* about that tree?"

Quinlan's eyes followed the direction of the pointing hand, but the face spoke no surprise.

"Shure, 'tis much as it iver was, a bit near the window, but 'twas a fancy of Miss Peg's to have it left so; she'd niver have a twig of it touched."

"I—I don't mean about it being so near, though it is *very* near; why, any one could climb up to the balcony from that bough."

"Ah! glory be to God, and what for should they be doin' that, ma'am? Shure, 'tis a quare fancy you've got in your head. There's bolts and bars and shutters to the window if it's Fenians or burglars ye're thinkin' of; though sorra' a one av thim gentry would iver come masqueradin' round Carrig-duve. 'Tisn't much here that's waitin' to timpt them, and well they knows it."

"But look at the bough, Quinlan," persisted the old lady; "don't you

see it's all bent and crushed? and see there, on the balcony, those broken twigs! Doesn't it look as if some one had climbed up, and——"

"Arrah! naubbeen bouragh!"¹ What will ye be saying next, ma'am?" scoffed Quinlan, as she stepped forward and peered about. But the indifference of the voice was belied by the anxious look in her eyes. "Shure, 'tis jest a bit o' a breeze that's broken thim dry twigs. Come in now out o' the cold, ma'am," she added hastily; "for I'll be locking up here while 'tis daylight. And for goodness' sake, Miss O'Hara, me dear, don't be after sayin' sich things downstairs; for 'tis as narvous they are, mistress and the master too, as iver childer could be. Why, since Biddy Lehane came here full o' the Headless Coach being seen again, not a sowl in the house will look out of a window after dusk, an' the mistress herself worse than any o' thim—an onaisy conscience I'm thinking; and sorra a wonder, if she's throubled in mind after all the evil she's worked in this house."

Her tongue rattled on and her busy fingers closed and bolted the window, while still the swaying boughs moved softly to and fro, and the young fresh green of the leaves stood out in faint relief against the pale primrose of the sky.

Miss Bedelia's face still wore that anxious expression, but she said no more.

Meanwhile Quinlan bustled about, replacing things in drawers, smoothing down the bed, and setting the chairs straight in their accustomed places. "God bless and make her happy," she murmured at last, as she rested from her labours, and looked with brimming eyes at the familiar room. "'Tis sad I am at heart this day, and sorely I'll miss her. Haven't I had care o' her from the hour she was born, the loveliest babe as iver drew the breath o' life, and the sweetest child and the merriest girl that iver danced herself into fun and mischief from sheer love o' divilry? Och! 'twas the fine spirit she had, the saints presarve her; and didn't I tell her luck was changin', and the marriage-card turnin' up too that very night as she was spakin' of going to Dublin? Faith, Miss O'Hara, 'twas a thrue prophet I was that time."

"Were you fortune-telling again, Quinlan? You were always great at the cards. You'd more signs and meanings than any one I ever met. And so you told Emilia her fortune?"

"Ah! thrue for you, I did *that*. And it's come thrue, ivery blessed word av it."

"I should rest content then," said Miss Bedelia gravely, "and not ask any more of Fate or the future."

"Maybe I won't. But marriage is a quare thing intirely, and you can't be sure how 'twill turn out. 'Tis all very well in story books, but shure *they* jest lave the folk at the church door, whin 'tis after their own door closes on them that the rale throubles begin. And now, Miss O'Hara dear, savin' your presence, I'll be after shuttin' up this apartment for good an' all, seein' things is straight, and the trunks safely locked. They're to go to the castle next week."

She paused and looked scrutinisingly round the room once more. "What made the mistress come pryin' about here?" she muttered. "I'd give a good dale to know. Well, 'tisn't much she'd have the chance of

¹ "Don't be bothering me."

discovering now. Miss Peg was a mighty good hand at kapin' her own secrets, and she's safe now, glory be to God!"

Safe! If Quinlan had possessed a little more worldly knowledge she would have known that a woman whose life holds a secret is never safe, and can never be sure but that some lurking foe lies in ambush to spring upon her with betrayal or accusation, even when she deems herself most secure!

CHAPTER XXIII

FEELING THE GROUND

It was a cold wet evening when, a fortnight later, the lady of Castle Lustrell drove up to her new home.

The promise of spring had not been kept, and the flowers and leafage looked shrunk and sodden as the carriage made its way up the avenue. Its two occupants looked silently out at either window, each mind busy with its own reflections. Judging from the expression of the two faces, it might be supposed that the honeymoon had *not* been a success. They looked bored and discontented, and unutterably weary. The dispiriting effects of the long journey and the present aspect of nature were not conducive to any display of cheerfulness; and Miss Em, as she gazed at the brooding clouds, massed heavily over the blood-red gleam in the west, felt as if the ominous face of earth and sky was but the reflection of her own forebodings.

The carriage stopped at the entrance; a glow of light and warmth shone from out the opening door, revealing the hall with its antique furniture and faded tapestry, and the dull gold of a picture-frame above the great fireplace.

The old butler, older far than his master, stood bowing respectful welcome to the travellers. A few steps beyond him Molly was waiting, her bright young beauty shining royally in the warm glow, her eyes eager and fond as they rested on the two weary faces.

"There, there, child, don't fuss," muttered her father impatiently, as she sprang forward and threw her arms round his neck. "I'm tired to death and half frozen. Where's Bates?" and he looked round petulantly for his valet. "I'll go to my room at once. Dinner at half-past seven, I suppose, as usual, Molly?"

"Yes, papa," said Molly, who had turned to greet her stepmother, and was wondering a little at the intense fervour of the quiet embrace which had answered her welcome.

Sir Jasper moved away and left them both standing by the fire.

"You'll have some tea, won't you?" asked Molly; "I thought you'd like it better than anything else. How pale you look, dear, and so tired! Sit down here, and let me take off your cloak."

Her deft fingers removed the travelling-wraps, and with a sigh of relief Miss Em sank into the comfortable chair by the great open fireplace and glanced round at the preparations for her comfort which the girl had so lovingly made.

She took off her gloves and veil, and pushed the close felt hat a little off her head, as if its weight troubled her. Molly thought she looked very ill and strangely old, but she said nothing, only busied herself with the tea that had just been brought in by the old butler.

Miss Em drank a cup, and it seemed to revive her. A faint glow came

into her pale cheeks, and the tired absent look was replaced by one of interest.

"I am glad to be home," she said. "It is weary work travelling, especially at this time of year. And it was awful at Killarney—rain, rain, rain, one incessant downpour! But now tell me all about yourself, Molly. What have you been doing? Was it very dull? And how are things and people in general? It seems an age since I left."

"*That* doesn't sound as if she were very happy," thought the girl; but she only knelt down on the velvet footstool at Miss Em's feet and chatted away in her old merry fashion, telling her of the hundred and one trivialities of Irish village life, which seem so important or entertaining to Irish people.

"Have you seen any one from Carrig-duve?" inquired Miss Em, after some ten minutes' gossip of this nature.

"No; but I believe they are quite well. The house-party left the day after the wedding, and, I heard, most of the servants."

"That I can quite believe; I expected the establishment would be reduced to its ordinary limits as soon as my back was turned."

"I hope you will find your rooms as you like them," continued the girl presently. "I could not do much. Everything is very old-fashioned, just as they were in my mother and grandmother's time, but at least they're comfortable."

"My dear, whatever they are, I am not likely to find fault with them," said Miss Em; "Carrig-duve has not made me ultra-fastidious."

"Are you going to have a maid?" inquired Molly. "I have never required one; papa said it was nonsense, and one of the girls here is very handy and does any little thing I want. But you, perhaps——"

"If I have any one, I should like my old servant Quinlan," said her stepmother. "But I'm not very anxious about one; they're generally more bother than they're worth. Of course if we entertain a great deal or go out much, I should like somebody to assist me in dressing, and to re-arrange gowns and do my hair. But at present I shall do very well without one."

"We haven't a very large establishment," continued Molly; "indeed, of late, papa has been cutting down everything in the oddest way. The servants declare they can't manage to keep the house as it ought to be kept; and when I say that to my father, he only answers, 'They must do the best they can.' But things will be different now," she added more cheerfully. "I'm sure you'll manage much better than I could ever do. To tell you the truth, I *hate* housekeeping. I like books and music, and walks and rides and croquet, and all that sort of thing; but managing servants and regulating household expenses and ordering dinners I positively hate!"

Miss Em looked somewhat wistfully at the bright face. "You needn't do it any longer, dear, unless you choose," she said; "though it is good practice. You may be having a house of your own some day, and you'll be none the worse for understanding the details of management."

Molly flushed to the roots of her pretty hair. "Shall we go upstairs now?" she asked, ignoring the insinuation in Miss Em's speech. "I told Dwyer—the girl I was speaking of—to take your dressing-bag to your room, and that you would tell her what trunk you wished opened. All your boxes have been sent from Carrig-duve, and they are in the little

ante-room opening out of your dressing-room, so you can soon have them unpacked."

Miss Em rose, and they left the hall and went up the broad oak staircase together.

The castle was very old, and for long years had been falling into neglect. Only a few of the rooms were ever used, the others had been closed to daylight and left to the tender mercies of damp and dust. The hall was very spacious, and served the purposes of general sitting-room and drawing-room. The dining-room was a long lofty chamber with a panelled ceiling, from which hung two massive chandeliers, capable of holding fifty candles each. It was lighted by three large windows deeply set, and showing views of the park and a glimpse of the sea. The large drawing-room was on the opposite side, with windows opening on the terrace. Miss Em had never seen it, nor had it been opened for use in her memory at all.

The suite of rooms to which Molly conducted her were over this drawing-room and on the same side of the house. They consisted of bedroom, dressing-room, and boudoir, all opening one into the other, and the small ante-room of which Molly had spoken. The dressing-room which they entered first was large and lofty, with deep bay windows. The furniture was old and sombre, but rich of its kind, and harmonised well with the oak-panelled walls and vast fireplace; the windows were hung with rich old damask; the great dressing-table which stood between them was a wonder of carving, and the large old-fashioned sofa and chairs were covered in chintz and piled with soft cushions.

The glow of the firelight made cheerful reflections in the polished woodwork and tall mirrors, and gave the room an air of comfort and homeliness.

Through the open doorway the adjoining bedchamber was visible, furnished in a similar style, but with the addition of an immense four-post bedstead draped in silk damask.

The boudoir was smaller, and furnished in a lighter and more cheerful style. The window seats were padded and cushioned; a carved oak writing-table and bookcase, ebony consoles bearing quaint china, folding screens, and quaint chairs of all shapes and sizes, distinguished this room; and Molly had filled every nook and corner with flowers and plants, and rearranged the prints and pictures and innumerable ornaments with some sense of artistic fitness that the eyes of the new Lady Lustrell were quick to recognise and appreciate.

"Everything is charming," she said, looking from one to the other of the open doors with their glimpses of comfortable interiors. "I am so glad there is nothing *modern* here; I detest up-to-date furniture and decorations."

"Do you?" said Molly, opening wide her pretty eyes. "Oh, I love them; they are so bright and artistic and fanciful."

"Yes, that I grant," said Miss Em, with fine contempt; "fanciful enough and capable of lasting some half-dozen years, if cared for. Why, such furniture as this lasts for generations and is as good at the end as at the beginning. Besides, it has such a *respectable* old-world flavour about it," she added, laughing. "Your modern millionaire can't compete with that. His surroundings, like himself, bear the stamp of *nouveau riche* on everything."

"Well, I'm very glad you are pleased," said Molly. "I was so thankful Aunt Sabina left all the arranging to me. She took herself off a week ago, and then we began work on these rooms."

"You have done wonders," Miss Em said, dropping a kiss on the bright upturned face. "But now I am going to be rude enough to turn you out, for I want a rest before I dress for dinner. Tell Dwyer that the long leather trunk holds my evening dresses, and I will wear the black velvet to-night."

Molly nodded, and drew the big cushioned sofa a little nearer the fire. "There," she said, "have a good rest. You needn't dress for an hour yet; and don't make a grand *toilette*, we're quite alone, you know."

"Your aunt isn't coming back yet?" asked Miss Em somewhat anxiously.

"No; not for ages," answered Molly. "She has gone to live with a widowed cousin at Ballymena. The Lord be thanked for all His mercies!" she added piously, as she closed the door behind her.

Left alone, Miss Em threw herself wearily on the big soft couch, and closed her eyes with a sigh of relief.

"So it's all over, at last!" she thought, "and now, I suppose, for the tug-of-war. I want the full worth of my bargain, and I mean to be the sole ruler *here* to begin with. Thank goodness that odious Sabina has had the discretion to take herself off. It would have been impossible for the two of us to live here. Molly is pliant and sweet enough; besides, I am fond of her, fonder than I ever imagined I could be of any one of my own sex. Between us we will wake the old castle up again, whether Sir Jasper likes it or not. I must have the best people here, and they must talk of me as of a person of importance—the person in the county in fact. Of course, a series of dinners must open the campaign. It is an odd thing that one can do nothing to acquire popularity or reward distinction except through the medium of eating and drinking. However, it is safer to begin on old lines before branching off into new ones. I intend to do both. Henceforth I shall live for society, and popularity, and the world. It will be fatiguing, I make no doubt, but it will keep me well employed, and form my best vengeance for slights and snubs in the past."

She opened her eyes again, and took a leisurely and more complete survey of her surroundings. "Yes, these rooms will do very well," she reflected; "they suit the place and they suit *me*. Rose-hued draperies and fanciful furnishing would be all very well for a bride of eighteen, but I prefer something solid and *good*. Everything here speaks of the past, a past with which I have nothing to do, but whose old-world flavour I like. I wonder what I shall have to do to the state drawing-room; I must see that to-morrow. The library and dining-room I know; I think they are all right."

Gradually her eyes closed, the warmth and stillness and perfume of flowers lulled her senses and soothed her tired nerves, peace stole softly over her wandering fancies, and she lost all memory of troubles, present or to come, in the deep trance of slumber.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIRST CLOUD

A clock softly chiming the hour of seven startled the sleeper at last. She sprang up for a moment, gazed in bewilderment at the strange room. "I—I was dreaming I was back at Carrig-duve," she said as she rose. "Seven o'clock, and they dine at half-past! Gracious, how could I have slept so long, and how shall I ever manage to dress in half an hour?"

She hurried into the adjoining room. The fire was burning brightly, and a number of wax candles had been lit in the china candelabra each side of the dressing-table.

The black velvet dress lay on a couch at the foot of the bed, and her jewel-case stood on a small table beside it.

She stood for a moment silently surveying herself ere she took off her travelling-dress and opened her dressing-bag.

"I won't risk a maid's inquisitive eyes—*yet*," she said. "There'll be talk enough in the servants' hall presently. I mustn't betray my *petits secrets*."

When she rang the bell for Dwyer's assistance with her dress, the girl thought she had never seen a "finer looking lady" than the new mistress of the castle. Sleep had given colour to her cheeks and light to her eyes, and her own experience of "judicious aids" had worked wonders. The rich black velvet showed off her white throat and arms to perfection, and the diamonds and emeralds of Miss Bedelia's wedding gifts still further enhanced her striking appearance.

"Not a day over thirty-five, and good at that!" she said to herself triumphantly. "I see I want rich and good materials now; muslins and silks and laces won't do any longer—except as accessories."

She took her gloves and handkerchief from the girl's hands, and swept downstairs just as the second bell had ceased ringing.

Sir Jasper and Molly were standing by the great fireplace in the hall. She came slowly down the wide shallow stairs, the soft rich folds of velvet trailing behind her beautiful figure, and the emeralds and diamonds gleaming on throat and arms. Involuntarily her eyes rested on her husband's face as he looked up and watched her approach. Something in it—a new expression—an expression that had not been there when he left her two hours before—caught her ever quick glance—and for a second's space turned her cold and sick with sudden apprehension.

"He has learnt—*something*." So the fear translated itself, and the blood grew cold in her veins, even while the instinctive courage of her nature and her race set every nerve in steely defiance against the folly of self-betrayal.

Not a tremor in face or lips or voice gave any sign that she had noticed what Sir Jasper had been equally unconscious of betraying; and yet they met with so wide a gulf of difference between their parting two hours previously and that present meeting that no power or will of either could ever bridge it over.

Sir Jasper offered his arm, and Molly followed them both into the dining-room. She was nervous as to the dinner, for it was her first attempt at ordering one on her own responsibility, and this nervousness

kept her from remarking the constraint of her two companions, or the strange manner in which from time to time her father eyed his wife.

The flush on Miss Em's cheek grew deeper; her eyes had a wild brilliance that betokened intense mental excitement. She ate scarcely anything, but her champagne glass was filled rather oftener than was prudent, and she rattled on about a hundred different subjects without waiting for response, or ever seeming to heed the fact of Sir Jasper's silence. The change in her from the tired, weary, heavy-eyed, haggard woman of two hours before astonished Molly, who was innocent as yet of the magic powers of rouge and *blanc de perle* and *kohl* judiciously applied.

She had always admired Miss Em; and she admired her more than ever to-night, as the meal drew to a close and she felt it had been a success in every way; any little omissions or drawback passing unnoticed while Lady Lustrell's sallies and anecdotes were flashing merrily round the board.

"Was it all right?" she asked anxiously after they had gone back to the hall and seated themselves on either side the bright and welcome wood fire.

Miss Em took up a hand-screen and held it between her face and the glowing flames. "Was what all right, dear?" she asked somewhat absently.

"The dinner," answered Molly.

"Oh, charming—perfect," returned her stepmother vaguely. "Ugh! what a storm!" she added, lifting her head as if listening to the fierce blasts of wind and torrents of rain.

"Yes; and we always hear it so plainly," said Molly. "The wind howls round this old castle like a legion of fiends."

Miss Em shivered. "That's one of the advantages of a fine situation," she said. "At Carrig-duve we are quite sheltered, but then it is so shut in."

"Do you think you will be happy here?" asked Molly suddenly, as she slipped down on the rug beside her and leant her head caressingly against her shoulder. "I hope so!"

"Happy!" exclaimed Miss Em involuntarily. "As if—— Yes, of course I shall," she added with a little forced laugh; "I expect to have plenty of enjoyment out of life still. We'll wake them all up, Molly. The castle must regain its old *prestige*—music, dancing, laughter, riot shall ring out through these old rooms once more. Young faces, young feet, young voices will wake the echoes again. Oh! I love youth about me; I have lost mine, but I remembered it so well that for its sake——"

A dry significant cough cut short her words. She started and glanced round. Sir Jasper was standing in the open doorway, his colourless face and steely blue eyes thrown into strong relief by the lights from the room he was leaving and the hall he was entering,—those eyes were fixed on Miss Em's face with the same strange expression that had already made her heart thrill with fear.

Slowly he advanced—his face set as a waxen mask. Her mind, already filled with apprehension, shrank from giving expression to its forebodings, but her heart grew heavy as lead, and her features refused to answer her effort at indifference.

Molly sprang up from her caressing attitude and drew a large low chair forward for her father to sit in. He dropped into it, and spread his thin wrinkled hands to the warm blaze.

"So you love youth and young life about you, my lady?" he said significantly. "I should have imagined that memories of the past were none so pleasant as to raise any desire for their recall. I, for my part, should prefer to forget what I have—outlived."

Molly looked at him, a little surprised at the acrimony of his tone and the curious expression of his eyes. His wife let her gaze rest tranquilly on the fire. Her hand trembled slightly where it lay against the soft dark velvet of her skirt. She lifted it, and slowly and languidly moved the screen between her and the cold watchful face opposite her own.

"We cannot all feel alike, my dear Sir Jasper," she said lightly. "I was saying that young life around one keeps one young, and for Molly's sake——"

"Thanks for your consideration," said Sir Jasper, in that cool languid drawl which, to any one who knew him, was always a sign of intense irritation; "but I do not intend to make any difference in the arrangements here, for—Molly's sake."

A hot flush dyed Miss Em's cheek. Her grey eyes flashed up at that chill brooding face with sharp interrogation; some covert meaning was in those words, she felt assured, but she was too proud to risk a discussion or a scene before Molly.

"Of course," she said readily, "I shall be only too happy to fall in with your views in everything, Sir Jasper."

"I am glad of that," he said curtly. "They may not be quite in harmony with your own at first, so it is as well we should come to an understanding."

He turned to his daughter, whose wondering eyes were eloquent of surprise. "Molly, my dear," he said, "in my dressing-room you will find a letter which I wish you to copy and send off for me by first post. It is to your Aunt Sabina," he added significantly, as the girl rose at once to obey.

"Aunt Sabina?" she echoed. Her voice was full of dismay, but her father only waved her aside, with an impatient frown.

As the door closed on the girl's white figure, Miss Em let the screen fall on her lap and looked him straight in the face.

"Sir Jasper," she said slowly and distinctly, "you will perhaps explain what you mean. In what way have I offended you that your manner has changed so suddenly, and why do you wish to humiliate me before your daughter?"

He leant back in the chair, and, joining the finger tips of both hands together as if to emphasise his speech, surveyed her for a moment with a sullen fury that alarmed her.

"I have—humiliated—you, as you call it," he said slowly, "because you have deceived me. Because I have found out your secret; because, had I known you *as you are* I would never have committed the folly of marrying you. Last of all, because having committed that folly I at least intend to suffer as little as possible from its results. Are you prepared to listen to my intentions with respect to our present situation?"

"I—I do not understand what you mean; how you *dare*——"

He held up his hand—that thin, wrinkled, blue-veined hand at which she had once shuddered. "That is a lie," he said sternly. "But I have no wish to unveil your past to-night; sufficient that I *know* it. Sufficient that having recognised your deception and its reasons I shall allow myself the sweetness of my own revenge for *my* own reasons. Your life here will be regulated by my desires—not your own. Your position I cannot, un-

fortunately, gainsay ; but I shall take care you have but its empty honours—no substantial good. I have requested my sister to return here at once, and she will resume her old place as housekeeper. You are at liberty to make any excuse you desire by way of explanation—want of inclination, dislike to domestic matters, any of the pretty little tarradiddles at which you have always been an adept."

"I—I will not submit to such treatment!" exclaimed Miss Em furiously as she sprang to her feet. "I insist on knowing your reasons."

"Pray moderate your voice and your temper," he answered smilingly. "You have of course an alternative if you prefer to rebel instead of submit. You can return to Carrig-duve, or live apart on an allowance from me. But permit me to remind you that the eyes of the whole county will be upon you then, and that even after—twenty years—a secret may leak out."

She sank into her chair again, white and cold and trembling. "Some one has maligned me. I—I have so many enemies," she muttered. "But it is unfair to condemn me unheard."

"Thank you," he said icily ; "but I have not reached my present stage of life without knowing how *well* a woman can make out her tale if it is to serve her interests. Of course, all this comes of my being such a fool as to marry you. I can't imagine what possessed me. I saw through your arts plainly enough. I knew what you and Lady Patricia were aiming at, but I also knew I was not by any means the wealthy 'catch' you both imagined, and that the bargain was not so one-sided after all. I am by no means sure that I haven't the best of it," he added, surveying her with a cool insolence that fired her blood, and woke the fierce O'Hara temper into one of its fiercest outbursts. But it might as well have spent itself on a marble rock as on the cool, icy indifference of Sir Jasper. Long years of selfishness had moulded him into a beautiful passivity where women were concerned. In youth they had suffered enough at his hands to bring forth tears and reproaches innumerable. Such grief and such reproach never touched his conscience ; they only affected his comfort for the time being, and led him to avoid diplomatically any temptation to their repetition.

He was not incapable of kindness, so long as it entailed no personal sacrifice, but he objected to scenes, and he disliked to be "found out." It was unnecessary, and it was bad taste, and he did his best to avoid such a social blunder, less as a tribute to virtue than one to conventionality and comfort. A man of more sensitive nature and less immoral tendencies might have taken his evil deeds to heart, or felt his hearth shadows chilled by remorseful memories, but Sir Jasper Lustrell was at once too callous and too selfish to be so troubled.

The one thing that roused him to anger was an offence against his peace of mind. He was merciless both to the crime and the offender. For years he had not been so disturbed and so infuriated as by his discovery to-night. It had roused all that was bitter and evil in his nature ; had recalled long past scenes when the position of deceiver and deceived had been reversed, and had sharpened his faculty for malice into a keen, savage desire that was only a degree less brutal than the violence of revenge.

"She shall suffer every day and every hour of her life henceforward," so ran his reflections as he leant back and surveyed his wife, listening unmoved to her anger, smiling cynically from time to time at the illogical

phases that anger took. "It will be an occupation for me to invent such punishment. But I must take her measure first. There are women whom it is not safe to drive to desperation. I learned that—once."

He rose abruptly. A long dead memory cut him sharply to the quick; the vision of an angry face, that in one brief hour had been brought into his presence again with all the anger hushed to eternal peace and all the reproaches silenced.

"One never knows what women will do," he reflected, "and I don't desire another scandal."

"We will end this discussion once and for all," he said curtly. "It is desirable to maintain some appearance of propriety in our very recent relationship. But in everything appertaining to the management of affairs here, I alone am to be consulted. You wished to be Lady Lustrell, and you have achieved your desire. I advise you for your own sake to make the best of the empty honour you have gained. There will be little else to reward your achievement."

He bowed ironically and left her standing there, the anger in her heart spent and burnt to ashes of despair.

CHAPTER XXV

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

MOLLY was surprised to find the hall vacant when she returned after copying that distasteful letter. Her stepmother had retired to her own room without even a "Good-night."

If the girl had seen her face as she stood on the threshold of those luxurious chambers, she would have been almost scared by its passion and fierceness.

With a deliberation, terrible in its contrast to the flash and fury of her anger, Miss Em closed and locked door after door of communication.

Then she lit the candles before the long mirror, and stood there, silently surveying herself, every nerve and fibre of her frame quivering and thrilling with rage.

"Oh! is there *nothing* I can do?" she cried; "nothing, nothing? Surely my wits haven't deserted me. I never yet have given in to any man; am I to begin—*now*?"

The light fell on the flashing jewels, swaying with the storm of her breast—the hurried breath and suppressed sobs of a woman's futile anger. Tears rushed in a burning throng to her eyes, but her strong will held them back.

"I won't cry, I am sick of tears," she went on; "they are so useless, and I have shed so many."

Her arms fell to her side, she turned away from the glass and began to pace to and fro the long shadowy room.

"I wonder which is the saddest stage of a woman's sorrow," she reflected; "to cry because her heart is breaking for misery, or *fear* to cry because she has learnt the uselessness of tears, and knows that grief brings fresh wrinkles, shadows unobliterable, lines and furrows no cosmetics can cure?"

She caught sight of her tall figure moving to and fro with the grace and restlessness of some untamable creature. "God! Of what did You

make me?" she cried suddenly, the passion in her voice breaking the hushed silence of the room like a jarring discord.

The sound startled her and acted like a spell on her excited nerves.

"This will never do," she thought; "I shall be going out of my mind, or doing something desperate; and I have to live, act, endure still. Oh! how cruel life is! I thought I had done with all the horrible part of it; that I could afford at last to be natural, and it seems I am worse off than ever. Truly Fate must have a spite against me! I can't let myself down *now* before all those hateful women. How they would enjoy my disgrace after all these years of defiance! Better give in to Sir Jasper than let them have the laugh! I wonder how much he knows? I wonder how he heard? he spoke too positively for conjecture. Could Denis have betrayed me? There is no one else I have to fear."

She paused, losing herself apparently in a maze of conjecture, then suddenly she seized one of the candlesticks and hurried into the little ante-room where her boxes were standing just as they had arrived from Carrig-duve. Taking a bunch of keys from her pocket, she opened one of the trunks, a small insignificant-looking one, piled up with books, papers, writing-cases, and odds and ends of all kinds. Impetuously she seized one after another of the various articles and flung them out on the floor; a strange anxious look crept into her face as she ended a search apparently futile.

"It is no use looking in the others," she muttered; "they were all packed and locked before that last evening. I only left this one open and put everything in that was lying about or forgotten. What can have become of it?"

She knelt down amidst the *débris*, peering anxiously to and fro, her hands moving among the fragile, useless things with anxious hopelessness.

"If I left it there—if it was in my room—if *she* has found it!"

She gave a little inarticulate cry, and pressed her hands to her brow. "Oh! Let me think, let me be calm. How was it? I had the book in my hand; I was going to burn it, I remember; then the knock came to the window—the old signal. I must have dropped it by the fireplace; I never thought of it again. Oh! what a fool I was! Now I see it all; she has read it and told Sir Jasper, or written. The sudden change in him from the hour of our arrival proves *that*! Ah, have I found thee, O mine enemy?"

She rose to her feet and stood there gazing with helpless wrath at the confusion she had created. Then she seized the things, and thrust them pell-mell into the box, closing and locking it with savage haste.

"There is just one loop-hole of escape. Quinlan may have found it. I must go to Carrig-duve to-morrow and find that out. But yet, Sir Jasper's strange conduct—his accusation? He must have had good authority for speaking as he did. Oh heavens! they will drive me mad between them, or to——"

She looked strangely round the room.

"No; I mustn't take to *that*," she cried wildly. "God of mercy, hold me back, even in all my misery, from so desperate a remedy! And oh! if Thou dost heed or care for prayers, listen to mine to-night! Send me sleep and rest, for I can bear no more."

She stumbled back to her bedroom and replaced the candlestick, and then threw herself dressed as she was on the couch before the fire. The

climax to all she had endured the past fortnight had been reached this evening. The result was an inevitable collapse. Mind and brain were alike incapable of bearing more. Helplessness and hopelessness overwhelmed her, and she felt like some battered, storm-driven barque drifting over the dark waters of Fate.

As the night deepened, a deeper mournfulness sounded in the moan of the wind, and the falling tears of heaven. She lay and listened in the frozen apathy of despair, thankful only for the sudden lull of peace which had stolen at last to her spent and overwrought brain.

It was not sleep, it was not even rest; but it was the precursor to either; a temporary lull in the fearful storm that had racked and rent her in these last fearful hours!

* * * * *

If the veil could have been lifted from the hearts of the three people who met at the breakfast-table at Castle Lustrell next morning, strange and diverse would have been the revelations of each.

Sir Jasper, never at his best either in looks or temper in the early part of the day, looked feeble and querulous to a degree. Miss Em, despite cold water and skilful use of toilet adjuncts, showed unmistakable signs of the conflict of the previous night. The morning is always cruel to women who have passed their *première jeunesse*; and Miss Em, who would have faced a regiment fearlessly by the light of candle or lamp, knew how much she betrayed when the searching rays of sunshine fell upon her at the breakfast-table of any house where she had not yet found the best vantage-point for seating herself.

To judge from her manner, however, the conversation of the previous night might never have taken place. She smiled at and turned aside all Sir Jasper's ill-natured cynical speeches, and simply *would* not be driven to retort.

When breakfast was nearly over she turned to the old butler who had been waiting on his master during the meal. "Brian," she said, "I want the carriage round in an hour's time. Be good enough to order it."

Sir Jasper looked up sharply. "The morning is fine enough for a walk," he said; "I never allow the carriage out till after luncheon."

"Very well," said Miss Em quietly; "it is rather a long walk to Carrig-duve, and the roads will hardly be at their best after the storm of last night, but I suppose I can manage it. You need not expect me back to luncheon."

"Oh, if it's to Carrig-duve you're going," grumbled Sir Jasper, "you had better have the carriage. You're in a great hurry to see them."

Miss Em gave no reply. She finished her tea and put down her cup. The man had left the room to give the necessary orders.

"May I ask what day you expect your sister?" she said coolly to Sir Jasper, "because I detest housekeeping, and it would be no use commencing what I do not intend to continue. Molly may as well give the orders up to the time of Miss Lustrell's return. It will be conferring quite a favour on me."

Sir Jasper's brow darkened. He had not expected to have the ground cut from under his feet in this fashion. He had meant to give the first intimation to his daughter of the slight to be put upon his wife, but she had forestalled him.

He looked at her, quite at a loss to reply, and Molly's pained, astonished face added fuel to his wrath.

"Your family were proverbial for being bad managers," he sneered; "but I should have imagined a woman of your age would have been capable of domestic superintendence."

"Capable—yes," agreed Miss Em smilingly; "but not inclined to undertake it when any one else in the house will do it. These little matters are so much better put on a proper footing from the first, my dear Sir Jasper, that I prefer to mention it at once to your daughter and yourself."

"Madam," said the old man sharply, "I might insist upon your fulfilling certain duties which appertain to the mistress of this house."

"Oh no, no," laughed Miss Em merrily; "you would never be so cruel, Sir Jasper! I am a most incapable housekeeper, I assure you, and you would never have a dinner fit to eat if I had the ordering of it. You can't tell what a relief it was to hear that your sister was coming back to us. She will take the responsibility of our first dinner-party entirely off my hands, and keep up the *prestige* of the castle so much better than I could do."

"Dinner-party?" queried Sir Jasper. "Pray, who said anything about dinner-parties? If you think I am going to give any, you were never more mistaken in your life."

"Oh! do you really mean that?" said Miss Em, raising her eyebrows with affected surprise. "Well, it is good news. I have been quite dreading the ordeal, I assure you. I detest dinner-parties myself, but I was so afraid you might look upon *one* at least as obligatory to your position. But you don't? That is really very charming, and makes it so easy for me to explain to people: 'Sir Jasper does not like dinners'; 'Sir Jasper is such an invalid that the fatigue and excitement of dinners quite upset him'; 'Sir Jasper——'"

"D——n it, madam, will you hold your tongue?" roared the old baronet furiously. "Do you suppose I'm going to be represented as a hypochondriac to please you? I'll give a dinner every night of the week if I choose, and ask whom I like to it! I'll have no woman dictating to me what I'm to do, or not to do."

Miss Em rose from her seat with quiet dignity.

"I have no wish to *dictate* to you in any way, Sir Jasper—quite the reverse. But permit me to remark I am not accustomed to be sworn at; and if you cannot moderate your language in the presence of ladies, I at least must decline to listen to it."

She had swept out of the room and closed the door before the old man had recovered from his astonishment.

There was nothing to do except vent his wrath on Molly, who, though personally unoffending, belonged to the same sex as the offender. This he did unsparingly, until he had reduced the girl to tears. When that was accomplished he retired to his own study, a luxurious octagon chamber specially dedicated to himself and his comforts, and where no rash intruder ever dared to venture. Here he sat himself down before a fire which, except in the heat of summer, was always kept burning in the vast open fireplace. A table beside the tall velvet-backed chair held papers, books, cigar-boxes, all the paraphernalia of a man's comfort. The walls were lined with book-cases and rare engravings, and a few choice

bronzes and sculpture relics of bygone days, when his ancestry had loved art, or patronised it, relieved the sombre aspect of the room. The owner of it all looked the picture of refined discontent, as he lit a choice cigar and leant back against the cushions. For some moments he smoked in silence, the frown deepening on his brow, the lines about his mouth showing hard and cruel in their set savagery of expression.

When the cigar was finished he suddenly leant forward and unlocked the drawer of the table by his side. From amongst the mass of papers and letters, all neatly arranged and docketed, he took out a small thick packet wrapped in brown paper. For a moment he held it in his hands, looking at it as if it were some noxious thing; then he laid it down on the table before him and began to scan page after page with moody, sullen eyes.

The writing was a woman's writing. The entries were the mad, impulsive, incoherent confessions of a girl's undisciplined heart, a girl who called herself, in these tear-blotted, accusing pages, "Peg, the Rake."

CHAPTER XXVI

FOREARMED

"BLESS us and save us, if it baint Miss Peg herself; beggin' yer pardin', darlin', me lady, I mane!"

Quinlan had opened the door to the footman's loud rap and found herself confronted by the castle carriage, from which Miss Em had alighted.

"How are you, Quinny?" she said hurriedly. "Hush!" she added warningly, as she closed the door and laid her hand on the old woman's arm; "it's you I've come to see. Keep your wits about you and answer me one question—*straight*. Did you find a leather-covered pocket-book in my bedroom after I left?—full of writing. Yes—or no."

"No, darlin'! me lady, I mane. I found nothing save an old pair of silk stockings, and a bog-oak brooch stuck in the pin-cushion."

"Did any one else go there before you? think well, Quinny. You don't know how important it is for me to know."

"Shure, now an' I come to think of it, me lady, I remimbers the whisk of a gown as I looked out of Miss Bedelia's door, and my remarkin' that same to her and wonderin' who would be after peerin' and pryin' into the room so soon after ye'd left it."

"Ah!"—Miss Em caught her breath sharply. "Then I know where I am; that'll do, Quinny. I'll speak with you later on. Now—announce me!"

So might a royal visitor have spoken; so might a duchess have swept into the old dingy dining-room; so might an O'Hara alone have answered to the whip and spur of circumstances, determined that neither eye nor limb should show sign of failing or of fear.

Mrs. O'Hara rose at her entrance, her face white, her manner somewhat nervous. This splendid vision, faultless in attire, radiant in looks, startled her out of her usual composure.

"How are you both? You see I lost no time in coming over to see you!" exclaimed Miss Em, greeting first one and then the other. "You don't look very well, father; not fed up enough, I suppose. At your time of life you want good nourishment and plenty of it. You should insist on getting it. Well, you see I'm alive and hearty. We returned yesterday;

everything is delightful at the castle. Sir Jasper's sister had considerably gone away, but I've asked her to return. And Molly, the dear girl, is as charming as ever she can be. I thought I'd just run over and pay my respects here. Thank you for sending over my boxes"—(with a gay little nod at Mrs. O'Hara); "they were there safe, and my maid unpacked them last night. I found everything all right."

She dropped a hurried kiss on her father's head, and then drew up a chair beside him.

"I'll stay to luncheon," she said agreeably. "I suppose you *have* something in the house. And you must treat me to a bottle of Burgundy, father, just to welcome me back, you know."

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," said the old gentleman, beaming on her with proud and admiring gaze. "I'll fetch it from the cellar myself. You have the keys there, I suppose?" he said, looking at the basket which Mrs. O'Hara was jealously guarding.

Miss Em made a sudden dive at it and handed it to her father. "There," she said, giving him the key which she knew well; "now you run off and show me what a good old cellarer you can be. Remember you've got a titled lady for your daughter now, and you must do her honour."

Her gay little laugh, her incessant chatter seemed but the exuberance of supreme content and heart-whole gaiety; only a very sharp eye would have discovered that both mirth and chatter were thoroughly artificial, and that she herself was in a state of supreme nervousness.

Mrs. O'Hara was puzzled as well as irate. Her step-daughter was even more insolent than of yore, and yet she felt she could not snub Lady Lustrell as she had been accustomed to snub Emilia O'Hara.

They sat for a moment in silence, casting furtive glances at each other; the one conscious of a meanness that had all the will and purpose of wrecking the other's life, and that other equally conscious of the action and its authorship, and storing up future vengeance in a sorely troubled mind.

"She has done it; I can read it in the *fear* in her eyes," thought Miss Em savagely.

"I wonder if he has told her yet. No; impossible. She could not be so indifferent and cool if he had. There would have been a scene, I am sure," so ran Mrs. O'Hara's reflections. "What a hypocrite she is! How she has deceived every one all her life! How completely she hoodwinked that poor old man! Well, I hope he will serve her out for it. She certainly deserves it. I only did my duty by warning him. What a pity I only found out her secret a day too late!"

"Do you wish to go to your room and remove your bonnet?" she said at last stiffly. "You will find it all in order; I saw to that myself."

"Thanks, how kind of you!" said Miss Em; "but I don't think I'll go upstairs. It's not worth while for the short time I shall be here. Perhaps, though, you would send something out to the men? Bread and cheese and whisky, or something of that sort."

A thin streak of crimson came into Mrs. O'Hara's shallow face. She could scarcely refuse the request, but it went to her heart to have to dispense hospitality to her hated step-daughter's servants.

"I'll tell Quinlan," she muttered, darting an angry glance at the imperturbable face. "Perhaps you'll excuse me now for I have to see about the luncheon."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," said Miss Em suavely. "You wouldn't be

standing on ceremony with me at *this* time of day, I'm sure; and I think I hear the governor returning. We'll find plenty to talk about, I've no doubt; and as for luncheon, really, a glass of wine and a biscuit is as much as I care for. But I know you are a very Martha of hospitality, so I'll not presume to dictate."

"There, I think that was a good shot," she said to herself as her enemy retreated abruptly.

The mask fell from her face as the door closed. All the anxiety she felt, the indignation she had suppressed, the dread of what the hateful prescient future might have in store for her, flashed out in the brooding darkness of her eyes and the frown that deepened on her brow. "It gets so wearisome, this perpetual playing of a part, and oh! I *am* so tired of it," she thought. "In all the world there's not a creature with whom I can afford to be perfectly open and truthful, except perhaps Quinny."

The entrance of her father roused her again. She rose from her chair, and going up to the old man put her arms round his neck and stood for a moment leaning her head against his shoulder.

"Why—Peg, why, my dear!" he exclaimed in some surprise at so unwonted a display of feeling. "There's nothing the matter, is there?" he asked tenderly. "You're not unhappy, Peg?"

"No, father, oh no," she said quickly; "a little tired and worn out, that's all. But I want you to say you forgive me for being such a bad, troublesome daughter as I have been to you. I—I never asked before, did I? But I do now. After all, I am your child, your only child, and you were so fond of me, once."

"Always, always, my darling," said the old man, patting her gently on the shoulder as if she were a child he was soothing. "Just as fond now, Peg, as when you were a little spoilt, mischievous girl, the life and sunshine of the place. Surely you don't think I've ever changed towards you?"

"No, father, no," she said chokingly; "but it's good sometimes to feel one is *loved*. I've given you a lot of trouble in my time, you poor old dear," she added, lifting her head and gazing with strangely wistful eyes at the worn face and silver hair. "A lot of trouble. But there, it's all over now; you'll have no more heartaches on *my* account, and no worries either, if I can prevent it. You're quite sure you forgive me—everything?" she repeated.

"Everything," answered the old man; "and I do hope this was a wise step of yours, and that you'll be happy. You were always wilful, you know, Peg. You took your own way in this as in other things; I hope it wasn't a foolish proceeding on your part. Ah! marriage is a great risk, my dear, a great, great risk."

She sighed heavily, and unclasped her arms.

"I know it is," she said slowly. "But I am too old now to begin life again. I must be content with the lees and the dregs, and be thankful I once had something better."

She walked over to the window and stood there looking out at the neglected garden, where the spring wind rioted amongst trails and tangles of creepers, and the spring sunshine glowed over weeds and flowers alike.

"Dear old garden, dear old home!" ran her thoughts. "I never knew till now how happy I was here *once*, and how safe. Ah, well! I mustn't begin to think these thoughts, or I'll break down altogether, and

my time hasn't come for that. I can't afford the luxury of a 'good cry' even; tears take too much out of one at forty."

She went back to her old place by her father and smiled down at his anxious face, and then began to chatter of a hundred trifles—anecdotes of her wedding tour; of people she had met and spoken with at Killarney; of the castle and its inmates.

But now and then she stopped abruptly, and tried to remember what it was she was saying, and seemed to be listening to *herself* as if she were an outsider in the conversation. "How I go on!" she thought; "I'm like a machine set a-going for a given time. Shall I break down some day and betray myself?"

To her father she seemed just the old random, inconsequent Peg he had always known. He could not dream that she found it easier to act as was habitual and expected, than to reason out a new line of conduct or lay bare her unhappiness to any living creature. She had set herself a part, and she went through it merciless, but resolute, as was her nature when a given object was at stake.

When at last she left Carrig-duve, she also left Mrs. O'Hara puzzled beyond expression as to the success of her scheme, and smarting inwardly from many a sharp speech and veiled insolence on the part of Lady Lustrell.

But when the door closed on her, and the carriage was driving rapidly down the stony avenue, she poured forth vials of wrath on her unoffending husband, declaring that she could not and would not put up with his daughter's sneers and impertinences any longer; and winding up with a covert hint that the said lady might find the path of matrimony less smooth than she anticipated if something of her past career was brought to light.

"Old sins have long shadows," she wound up, "and perhaps my Lady Lustrell hasn't seen the last of hers."

Old Mr. O'Hara looked at the sharp, vindictive face in some alarm at the remark.

"Sins!" he echoed; "what sins of Peg's can be brought against her now? She was only foolish and reckless, no worse than other girls. Even if she had been she might be excused, she was so very beautiful, and she had no mother."

"Of course you will take her part—that is only to be expected," sneered Mrs. O'Hara. "She could make you believe anything. But, mark my words," she added emphatically, "the day will come when her sins will find her out; and the first person to visit them on her will be the selfish old fool she has married."

CHAPTER XXVII

"ONE TOUCH OF NATURE"

Miss EM had not trusted herself to speak to Quinlan again.

She had learnt all she wished to learn, and knew exactly what she had to combat in the future. That foolish record of her girlhood had fallen into Sir Jasper's hands, and her stepmother had been the means of its doing so. Everything it contained had doubtless been read by both, and she had now two enemies to face instead of one.

"The question is, can I do it?" she reflected. "Have I strength

and courage sufficient, and is the game worth the candle that will have to be burnt out in the playing?"

She leant her head back against the soft cushions of the carriage, and closed her eyes with a sense of utter weariness.

After all life is very hard for women; women of Miss Em's type, who live for the world and its social prizes, and have no definite object or ambition on which superfluous energy and mental strength can spread themselves; whose minds are but a general cargo of things, good, bad, or indifferent, and hold no special store on which to draw for individual benefit.

The march of progress has decided that women ought all to "do something," if only to keep them out of mischief; and there is no doubt that the dwarfed domestic sphere to which they have been so long relegated can no longer content them.

To the genius that has defied arbitrary control, and the intellect that has scaled barrier after barrier in its search for knowledge, the paltry vanities of ordinary female existence are utterly insignificant.

Man enters on the field of enterprise with less zest and far less enthusiasm, because to him it is no new thing. He has not undergone centuries of repression. He has no weakening hereditary theories to combat. But every gate her determination has unlocked, every bar her desire has leaped, every obstacle her will has vanquished, these make woman at once an incentive and a triumph!

She who has once loved art and touched the winecup of fame can never again be satisfied with the stunted career so long relegated to her. Fashion, folly, and frivolity fly abashed before mental freedom. What can they offer in any way worthy of comparison with the delight that thrills both soul and sense as the brain leaps into warm full life, untrammelled, undeterred! To own no rule but that of thought, no sway but the magic dominance that at once controls and commands it, this is indeed to *live*. To live by right of single birth-throe which has created a power and a life! To will and to be at the bidding of desire. To know that failure has no meaning, and success no shadow; to yield to the spell of inspiration, and leave brain or hand to put into visible shape what "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard"!

If the spell would but last, if the physical nature were only less arbitrary! Alas! alas! as well say if it were possible to paint the glitter of the dew, the bloom of the rose petals, the hues of the rainbow.

Life for many a long year had seemed impossible to Miss Em without perpetual excitement. If she had had any special ambition it was to be rich, and to be able to lord it over women who had at one time been very spiteful to herself.

Not a very noble ambition, or, indeed, a very creditable one; but, all the same, it was a crushing blow to be confronted with its failure just when achievement was possible.

She was not possessed of any distinctive talent or gift of genius. Her sphere of thought and life were limited to a purely personal existence, and to purely personal ambitions. She had no "views," and loved a social whirl better than contemplative comfort. She was clever enough to escape being overlooked among clever people, and skilful enough to appear retiring when it would have been risky to be assertive.

With a different training and different surroundings she might have been a better woman, and a more important one. But we have yet to

discover whether circumstances or ourselves are to blame for our manifold failures. Miss Em only knew that a foolish, hot-headed youth had left her stranded now on the barren shore of middle-age, with nothing very reputable to look back upon and nothing very hopeful to look forward to.

It was a sorry prospect. Life at the stage of regrets must always be that.

She stood apart from herself and contemplated that self as an onlooker might have done; and the long drive seemed all too short for the contemplation, and the weary brain refused to lighten the picture by any prospective view of hope.

* * * * *

Luncheon was long over when she reached the castle, and the old butler informed her that Sir Jasper was in his study, and Miss Molly in the grounds.

Thankful for a prospect of rest Miss Em went to her own room, giving orders to the maid that she was not to be disturbed till tea-time.

Her one chance she now knew lay in saving her energies, and making the best of the situation. As yet, Sir Jasper had made no tangible accusation; she must, if possible, prevent his doing so. When tact and submission would serve her end she was ready to appear submissive. On the other hand when warfare was imperative she must have bow and spear in readiness. But not for any consideration must she let herself down before the county who would criticise her, and the women who would envy her. "On guard" must be her watchword henceforth; "on guard" till the weary day had earned the rest of evensong, till the spent and storm-tossed vessel might "cross the bar" at last and know the peace of a sure haven!

The quiet and warmth of her room, and the absolute rest which two hours of solitude gave her, did much to tranquillise Miss Em's nerves and prepare her for the next meeting with Sir Jasper.

She had made up her mind that she would not quarrel with him, that nothing short of absolute cruelty should force her to do so. The hardest part of her life would be the infliction of Miss Sabina's presence, but even that she could tolerate when so much was at stake.

"After all it might not be for very long; Sir Jasper was old, twenty years older than herself." So ran her thoughts as she stood surveying herself in the glass before leaving her room for tea.

Molly was waiting for her in the hall. She looked a little troubled and perplexed; she had a vague feeling that all was not right between her father and his new wife, and the anxiety of her mind showed itself in her eyes as she turned to greet her stepmother.

"Papa has had some tea taken into his study," she said, and could not help noticing the relief that sprang into Miss Em's face as she heard the announcement.

"Oh then, we shall be all to ourselves," she said, sinking down into the low, deep chair Molly had drawn forward.

"Yes," said the girl; "we generally shall be alone at this hour too, for papa rarely joins me. Oh! how I wish he hadn't asked Aunt Sabina back! What could have induced him, and how could you let him?"

"My dear Molly," said Miss Em slowly, as she poured out the tea, "when you have lived as long in the world as I have done, you will find out that very little is to be gained by opposing a man in small

matters. Indeed, the very fact of giving in on minor points often enables a woman to gain an important one."

"Throwing a sprat to catch a mackerel," laughed the girl. "But I shouldn't call Aunt Sabina's presence here a 'small matter.' You can have no idea what a disagreeable person she is to live with. Such a screw. The servants all hate her. I'm sure there will be 'ructions' when they hear she is coming back. But surely you don't mean what you said this morning, that you would let her manage the house, just as if she were mistress? You were only joking, weren't you?"

Miss Em looked at the lovely pleading face with quite a new sense of the difficulty of acting a part.

She swallowed her tea and set down the cup. For once in her life she longed to be able to be honest and open with the girl, but the temptation had to be resisted. It would not do to risk betrayal; and youth is apt to be outspoken and disingenuous.

"No, Molly; I was in earnest," she said. "I'm a dreadfully lazy person, and I do hate housekeeping. I've never been used to it, you see, and I should be sure to make a desperate muddle of it all. Now, your aunt has for years managed everything here, and knows exactly how to suit your father's tastes. The arrangement, therefore, satisfies him, while leaving me at liberty. I won't say that I'm fond of the estimable lady," she added, laughing somewhat forcedly, "but no doubt we shall get on very well. I'm used to living with queer people."

"That is one reason why I imagined you would be thankful to be independent and free," said Molly. "I candidly confess I detest her, and I'm sure she'll spoil life here for both of us; it's a terrible disappointment—it is indeed."

Her lip quivered; the lovely radiant eyes looked almost tearful. Miss Em glanced away quickly, the sudden pain at her heart surprised herself.

"Oh! why can't one's actions only concern oneself?" she thought bitterly. "Why must the innocent always suffer with the guilty?"

"My dear," she said after that moment's pause, "I'm very sorry that you are averse to your father's wish. I—— Oh Molly, Molly!" she burst out suddenly, "I *can't* talk platitudes! It—it sounds so unreal; I've not got 'a little hoard of maxims' stored up with which to preach down a girl's heart. Oh, my dear, believe I'm fond of you, fonder, I think, than of any human being; and I wanted to make you so happy if I could. If this could have been avoided, believe me, I would have done my best to avoid it for *both* our sakes, and when I say, 'It must be,' I only say it because I know it. I can't give you any reasons either, only what your father decides upon *that* is what we both have to give into, whether we like it or not."

"Ah!" said Molly in quick alarm; "you have heard something about him—his health. I know his heart is weak; Dr. MacShamus told me so; and that's why you are so sweet and submissive to him. How good you are! I don't wonder that every one loves you; I've always said that you were my ideal of a perfect woman."

"A perfect woman—I! Good heavens, child, what an ideal you have formed!"

Her voice was husky and uncertain, but she nerved herself to be calm. A girl's foolish fondness,—what was that to break down the composure and self-control of years?

"But you *are* my ideal, you know," said Molly protestingly; she came and knelt down on the rug by Miss Em's side and leant her head against her as she had a childish trick of doing. "Ask Paddy if you're not. I've always admired you so. Why, when you're in the room you can attract every one around you. You're so brilliant, and then you're so kind-hearted; you don't mind trouble or bother if it's to please any one else, and the poor people about the place all adore you. Why, only the other day Mrs. Rooney, the 'dalin woman' as they call her, was telling the cook how good you were to her and her children when they had the fever two years ago. No, don't shake your head, I mean it all. I've always thought you're such a good woman."

Such a good woman!

The words echoed and re-echoed in the weary over-strained brain. *Such a good woman!* The passionate denial forced back was only the indignant protest of genuine feeling. "What she thinks me, so I might have been," cried Self-accusation, "if only my youth had known one such friend as I feel it in me to be to *her*."

The soft slow tears, unchecked because unheeded, pure, womanly tears, gathered and fell one by one on the clasped hands.

Miss Em had broken down at last.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"MAKES THE WHOLE WORLD KIN"

THE lady of Castle Lustrell was very, very ill.

So ill that Dr. MacShamus, summoned in hot haste at dead of night, looked more than serious, and suggested a specialist from Dublin; so ill that Molly crept about on tip-toe, scared and terror-stricken; so ill that Miss Sabina's presence, hateful as it was, seemed both necessary and beneficial, inasmuch as nothing so weak as "feelings" ever shook her self-composure or betrayed her into any display of emotion.

"She has been living at high pressure so long," said Dr. MacShamus to his wife, "that it's no wonder she has broken down. The marvel is how she has kept going all these years."

"But why did she do it?" asked Mrs. MacShamus. The good worthy soul could not imagine any one living under "higher pressure" than that demanded by purely domestic obligations, varied by little social calls on one's attention.

"Why?"—the doctor looked at her as if wondering how much she could bear,—"Why? well, women do queer things sometimes, my dear. The 'cow-type' is the only safe one. To eat, drink, sleep, and rear their young. To chew the cud of sweet and homely fancies—never bitter ones. To take life easily, and make its amusements a pleasure—not a task. To know monotony only as a luxury easy of attainment and never an irksome bondage forced on endurance. I fear Miss Em was not of the cow-type—far from it. Life meant too much for her—monotony was death. She could not take her fill of idle purposeless days; and so varied her existence by escapades, and excitements, and stratagems which have landed her at last into congestion of the brain. It is the natural consequence of an unnatural state of things. I deplore it, but I have foreseen it since——"

"Since when, Jerry?" asked Mrs. MacShamus, looking up wonderingly as he paused.

"Since that day when she and Denis Morrison met again," answered the doctor absently.

The start of surprise, the quick flush on the old lady's cheek, warned him he had been imprudent.

"Don't you mention that to any living soul—on peril of your life!" he added with sudden sternness. "I'll have no gossip and scandal about the poor soul now. She's attained her ambition, I suppose, but all the same I'm d——d sorry for her. That cold-blooded petrification yonder is just essence of self and nothing more. He's scarcely the decency to appear sorry or even concerned. Molly is the only one at the place with an ounce of feeling, and she's a little too much. I had no idea she was so fond of her stepmother."

"Every one was fond of Miss Em who knew her," said Mrs. MacShamus, wiping her eyes. "But what did you mean, Jerry, just now, when you spoke of Denis Morrison? Surely that old story could have nothing to do with Miss Em's present illness."

"Nothing whatever," said the doctor curtly. "I never said it had."

"You—you mentioned his name," suggested the old lady.

"Yes, and I mentioned a cow, and—and a few other trifles—therapeutics, congestion, phlebotomy, cardiac affections," answered the doctor sharply; "but they're not of material importance to the case. I wish Sir Jasper would let me telegraph for Possett," he added suddenly;—"mean old brute!"

"But it's paying you a very high compliment, Jerry," said Mrs. MacShamus, "to be saying he's quite satisfied with your treatment."

"It's a compliment that saves him a hundred guineas, and that's more to the point," snapped the doctor sharply. "I've never had such a case before, and, frankly, I don't like the responsibility. The very fact of the sentiment concerned in the matter upsets me. If she were a stranger I wouldn't care; but I'm as fond of her as if she were my own child, and that's not a word of a lie, let me tell you."

"I can quite believe it, Jerry," said the old lady, "and indeed if I were you I'd not be standing on ceremony. Her life's more important than Sir Jasper's whims. Why don't you send for that Dublin man they say is so clever? You remember Miss Bedelia was speaking of him at the time of the wedding."

"True for you, old lady! I do believe you are really waking up at last. Faith, and I'll send off at once, and have him here to-morrow whether the old petrification likes it or not. Give me a kiss, old lady. 'Twas a brilliant idea entirely; Miss Em will be thanking you yet, or my name isn't Gerald MacShamus. He's just the man—young, clever, advanced, iron nerve, and a reputation to make. I wonder I never thought of him. Well, I'll be off and send the telegram. I don't know his address, but Dublin will find him no doubt. 'Tisn't a very common name!"

He bustled off in a whirl of excitement, leaving his wife to wipe her eyes at her leisure, and entertain "droppers in" with the latest bulletin of news from the castle.

* * * * *

If Miss Em had racked her powers of invention for a method of

springing into sudden popularity she could not have hit upon one more successful than this illness.

It was sudden, it was unexpected, it was at once tragic and affecting. The bride of a fortnight, and stricken down like this—fighting with the grim foe whom all alike shun and dread! Her name ran like wildfire from lip to lip, and every good deed and kindly word was remembered now. Even her traducers held their peace, and felt they could afford to “assume a virtue if they had it not,” and express their sorrow for such a calamity. Rich and poor alike flocked to the castle gates with sympathy and offers of help. It was the topic of the hour, and the concern even of the most unconcerned.

Meanwhile, the sufferer herself lay in a darkened room—blind, deaf, forgetful—and unconscious of anything around her.

Life had come to a sudden pause. The whole complex machinery was at a standstill. There was no physical suffering, only a sense of darkness and oppression—a bewildered endeavour to travel on a journey that offered perpetual obstacles—a progress met by blank, impossible walls—an entrance through gates which clanged and closed, and shut the traveller into a darkness dense and tomblike, from which she shrank shrieking in vain terror, and forced on by inexorable hands.

Yet, through all that terrible time the brain let no secret escape. No word betrayed the past or let in any light on the long-borne burden of shame, misery, false excitement, and false living which had made up the sum of existence for the last twenty years.

It was strange how one foolish incident seemed to haunt her. With what wearisome reiteration she returned to it day after day, hour after hour; she was always at work on that old black satin, trying to get it ready for the Dublin ball. Always unpicking and rearranging, and trying on, and beseeching every one to help her, or it would never be ready in time.

Molly nearly cried her eyes out over the pathos of those entreaties, and the utter uselessness of trying to soothe her in believing the task accomplished.

That ball seemed to date an epoch in her memory. Of her life before she said nothing; and of her life since there was but vague, foolish babbling: nothing that could possibly convey to any listener the effort it had been or still might be.

Miss Sabina listened, as she took her share of watching, with grim, unsmiling lips. To her this illness of her sister-in-law was but an ill-advised and inopportune proceeding. But she did not shrink from the duties it imposed on her, or from carrying out any instructions of the two doctors.

The “new man” from Dublin fully justified Miss Bedelia’s encomiums, and his treatment, though somewhat audacious in Dr. MacShamus’s old-fashioned opinion, was skilful enough to startle that worthy practitioner into praise of the most unqualified description.

It was a matter of no surprise (though it gave rise to much incidental warfare afterwards) when Quinlan marched up to the castle and announced her intention of nursing the patient. In vain Miss Sabina put on her most forbidding aspect and declared that her services were not required.

“Savin’ yer presence, ma’am,” was the old woman’s rejoinder, “it’s not his lordship himself nor the whole medical faculty that could be after kapin’

me back from me dear child. Shure, an' haven't I nursed and tinded and waited on her all her life, and is it now when she's lying at death's door that I'm to be forbidden her presence? If ye boult the door I'll get in through the windy; and if ye forbids me the castle, faith, I'll jist sit meself down at the gates yonder and tell ivery blessed sowl that comes near the place that it's yer spite and ill feelin' as is preventin' the darlin' from recavin' proper attintion, for ye was always jealous of her, that's thrue for ye; and I'll git the ears of the doctors, more power to thim, but nurse and care my dear Miss Peg I will, an' laste said the better for all!"

"And I suppose she's quite capable of doing all she threatens," reflected Miss Sabina savagely, "making a scandal of the place. *This* comes of marrying into such a set! I'd like to see any servant of the Lustrells behave in such a manner!"

Which, indeed, was most unlikely, for every domestic in the castle hated her and despised Sir Jasper, and were never inclined to do a hand's stroke for them that was beyond the radius of actual duty, laid down and paid for as service. The two women looked at each other in silence for a moment after their declaration, measuring swords, as it were, for the conflict.

They were a strange contrast.

Miss Lustrell, tall, bony, severe, in prim black lutestring gown and stiff cap; Quinlan, in "company dress," donned in haste before she left Carrig-duve, which *en passant* it may be stated she did with the most complete want of ceremony, much to Mrs. O'Hara's indignation.

The Paisley shawl was a gift from the first Mrs. O'Hara, and had been present at all the weddings, christenings, and festivities of the village for years past. She had put it on to do honour to "Miss Peg," as she still called her, not because it or the purple merino gown, its accompaniment, were suitable attire for a sick-room. Her apron and cap were in a paper parcel, which she was jealously guarding.

"Well, ma'am," she said inquiringly, as Miss Lustrell still remained silent, "what more credentials do ye want?"

"Oh, you can stay for a few days if you are so bent on it," snapped that lady; "but it's quite unnecessary—Lady Lustrell has every care and attention."

"I'm not doubtin' that, ma'am; but, all the same, love can't be bought like sarvice, and a lovin' hand and a watchful eye are better than physic any day."

Miss Lustrell deigned no reply to so foolish a statement, but handed the old woman over to Molly, with the information that she could sleep in the little ante-room while at the castle—Molly herself having taken the dressing-room so as to be within call night or day.

The person who approved most of this arrangement was Dr. Mac-Shamus. Molly was too young and impulsive, the maid too inexperienced, and Miss Lustrell herself too selfish and unfeeling to be good nurses. Quinlan was just what was wanted; devoted, patient, watchful, untiring.

The wiry frame, the quick eye, the gentle touch, were in themselves valuable aids to the treatment prescribed; and a sense of relief came with the very presence of the faithful old woman, as she took her place by the sick-bed, and gave her two subordinates to understand the routine to be observed henceforward.

Still the patient's progress was very slow, and for long clouds of uncertainty brooded heavily over the castle.

Sir Jasper kept almost entirely in his own room, contenting himself with a daily inquiry as to his wife's condition. Miss Lustrell took up her old place in the household, and badgered servants, and spied into cupboards and pantries, and screwed down every item of expenditure as if ruin were imminent. Molly grew pale and listless. The life was a dreary one for a young girl, and Paddy Kearney was away on duty, so she had no one to relieve the monotony of her existence.

She and Quinlan struck up a great friendship, and her devotion to her mistress seemed to Molly at once the most beautiful and touching thing she had ever witnessed.

Many a story and anecdote she heard from the old woman in those long hours when there was nothing to do except watch and wait for some hopeful change. Many a quaint conceit and jest brought the smile to her lips and whiled away the tedium of the anxious, monotonous days that dragged their slow length into weeks, before one could assure the other that there was hope at last.

CHAPTER XXIX

TOUCHING THE BORDERLAND

"QUINLAN," said Molly one evening as the two sat in the room adjoining Miss Em's, enjoying a cup of tea while the patient slept, "what was that Dwyer was saying to you this morning about the 'Headless Coach'? Surely it hasn't been seen again?"

"Shure, Miss Molly, 'twas but servant's gossip—nothing else at all."

"But you know, Quinlan, it does appear," said the girl anxiously. "I've heard of it ever since I was a child."

"Faith, darlin', one hears many things wid sorra a wurrd o' truth in thim."

"But you believe in the story, don't you, Quinlan?"

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't, Miss Molly. There's a power o' sich like tales to be heard for the axin'. Folks about here is jist crammed wid thim. 'Tis at wakes and births and sich times they tells thim, just by way o' cheerin' up the company. As for the Headless Coach now—well, that's a quare thing, Miss Molly, but 'twas near the gates o' Carrig-duve they're after sayin' it was seen. The saints presarve us!" (And she crossed herself hurriedly.) "But maybe 'tain't throe. 'Twas Pat Mulligan who set the tale goin', but shure he's not much to be believed whin he's the drain o' drink taken, and as often as not that's the time he sees things."

"A sign of death!" faltered Molly. "Quinlan, I wonder why we're all so frightened of death? We ought not to be, if we believe what we profess, that heaven is so much happier than earth!"

"Ah now, miss, don't ye be troublin' yer pretty head with sich rubbish!" exclaimed Quinlan, replenishing her cup with a genuine appreciation of the castle tea. "Lave it to the praistes and the clargymin. Faith, they're the proper people to larn us. Not that they know so very much after all," she added. "'Tis some quare stories I've heard o' thim gintlemin in my time, and not often that I throubles confession since Father Flavín made me do penance for sayin' this wurld was bad enough widout our going into purgatory afterwards. Heresy, he called it; and, faith, it took nearly a quarter's wages to buy enough candles to plaze him agin."

Since thin I've had my *own* idays of what 'tis best to say to the praistes."

"You're not a very good Catholic, then?" asked Molly.

"Faith, I'm good enough for a poor one," answered Quinlan, with a shrewd twinkle in her eye. "The quality is bound to support the chapel, and not poor craythurs widout a spare sixpence for themselves."

"What do they want so many candles for, Quinlan?" asked Molly curiously.

"Faith, and I'd like to know, miss! p'r'aps 'tis afraid o' the dark they are. Though, if 'tis to light the sowls in purgatory (God rest thim!) I'm thinkin' they'd a dale rather be in the dark, for t'wad be a quare mixture, and more like 'atin' each other than agrayin' they'd be. Didn't Timmy Hoolihan die scrachin' because he couldn't git at his mother-in-law to pound the life out o' her, and she herself dyin' the Tuesday after?"

Molly laughed. "But they're not in this world any longer," she said; "and you know it says in the Bible, 'There is no night there.'"

"Thru for ye, Miss Molly; now I niver thought o' that."

"I expect that is the way with many of us, we never do think for ourselves about these matters," said Molly gravely. "But you have always the priests to go to. Don't they explain anything you are puzzled about—miracles and things, you know?"

"Miracles is it? Ah now, miss, how wud they be explainin' what they don't know thimselves? Sorra a miracle I've iver heard explained save the one of Mrs. Moriarty's legs; and 'twas Johnnie Dorney, the fisherman, towld me o' that, seein' that it happened to himself. A regular rollickin' divil he was, savin' yer presence, Miss Molly."

"And what was the story?" asked Molly curiously.

"Ah now, 'tain't for the likes o' ye to hear perhaps, miss, though many's the time Miss Peg and I have laughed fit to kill ourselves over it. Well, 'twas like this, ye see. The bishop, he came to open a new chapel down Kilkee way, a poor place enough, and mostly fisher folks who get their livin' there. 'Twas quite a grand ceremony, and ivery one went to the sarvice, and among thim was Mrs. Moriarty, a fine buxom widdy woman wid two children, and as nate a foot an' ankle as ye'd wish to see. They did say as Johnnie Dorney was kapin' an eye on her for himself, but I wouldn't be after swearin' to that in a court of justice. Well, 'twas an illigant little chapel, more by raison of a gallery that ran at one side and was thought a grand piece o' work intirely. And 'twas in this same gallery that the widdy Moriarty was settin', and the childer, one on aiche side, and Dorney himself down below castin' a glance from time to time, jist to see how she was lookin' maybe. Well, miss, what wid the excitement, and the incense, and the singin', and the neighbours crowdin' her, and the children pushin' her to see the bishop at the High Mass,—for 'twas a rare fine sight for thim all—the widdy she took to lanin' over the little railin' o' the gallery by way of gettin' a better view, and what happens to her, but that she falls right over, and dead and kilt entirely she'd have been this blessed day, not a wurd av a lie about it, but that she'd the luck to catch her skirts (and for a mercy she wore thim fine and full) right on to a grand branch for houlding the candles which was fixed in the pillar benayth. There she hung, miss, thru as gospel, wid her legs down and scramin' like a Kerry cow, and the bishop he saw the inconvyance of it, and quick as lightnin' he roars out: 'Av iny one

looks at that woman I'll strike him blind.' Shure in a twinkling ivery eye in the place was shut tight as a grave and ivery head bent down, save only that rogue Johnnie Dorney, for he claps his hand over his left eye *only*—and sez he: 'Begorra, I'll vinture *one*!' and what he saw wid that right eye—well, maybe the bishop and he had it out betwane thim, as to the power o' Holy Church in thim parts; but all I know is that a month afterwards the widdy was Mrs. Dorney, and divil a bit o' blindness in Johnnie's right eye more than his left."

"But where does the miracle come in?" asked Molly, bubbling over with soft laughter.

"Faith, an' that's what I'd like to know, miss. 'Twas jist the iday of the bishop, and, shure, 'twas a dacint one enough, that he'd make thim believe he'd the power as well as the will to do what he said."

"And so you don't go to confession now, Quinlan?"

"Oh, once in a way, miss, I goes; jist to kape on the right side o' it."

"Of purgatory, do you mean?"

"Well, maybe it is that; I don't know. An' Miss Peg she's tould me many a story out of the Good Book; an' if it's good enough religion for her who is so clever, why, 'tisn't the likes o' me wud be takin' axception to it."

"If the priests knew?" asked Molly.

"Well, there'd be a power av penances, that's sure; so 'tis best they *don't* know, miss. 'Father darlin',' sez I, the last time as I was at the chapel, 'shure me mimry isn't what it was, nor me legs either, and that's the rayson I'm not comin' so often; an' as for sins,' sez I, 'shure there's moighty little chance o' committin' any where you niver see a blessed sowl from week's end to week's end, and have to work hard and jist tired to death as the night comes round, an' yer prayers no sooner said than you're aslape.'

"'God pardon ye av yer desavin' me,' he sez; 'but you was always the pious, well-manin' crayture, an' it's yer sowl ye've to think of, more than yer work,' he sez.

"'Shure, father darlin',' sez I, 'if I didn't work to presarve me body, where wud the sowl o' me be at all, at all?' Thin he remimbered some-thin' pressin' as wanted immadiate attention, an' he's not bothered about confession agin'."

"You've always lived here, Quinlan, haven't you?" asked Molly presently.

"Always, miss darlin'; I've niver been more than ten miles beyant Carrig-duve since I was born."

"And never married?"

"Thru for ye, miss. I niver have. Not from want av offers, but I niver see the bhoy that I'd have cared to wed. An' I've niver loved any livin' craythure as I've loved me swate Miss Peg, God save her!"

"She's always been very good and kind, hasn't she, Quinlan, and a favourite with every one?"

"That she has!" said Quinlan energetically. "An' a hard life she's had av it too for many years, as no one knows better than meself. Kept as poor as a beggar, and the very candles begrudged her, not to mintion food and drink. No fault av her father, miss, an O'Hara always gave *laun and vaula*.¹ But that Mrs. O'Hara the second—shure, I'd better not

¹ Full and plenty.

be talkin' o' her, or me tongue will be runnin' away wid me. So I'll say no worse av her, miss darlin', than that she'd skin a flint an' make soup av the lavings, and that's gospel thruth."

"Poor Miss Em!" said Molly thoughtfully. "And yet she was always so bright and cheery, and such good company."

"Maybe she's payin' for it now," said Quinlan sadly.—"Hark! was that her spakin'?—Miss Molly, listen, listen, darlin'."

They both sprang to their feet, and grasped each other's hands convulsively.

The voice that reached them from the adjoining room was the well-known voice, but the words—Oh, blessed change!—the words, weak and broken as they were, were rational and coherent at last.

"Quinny, I'm sure I heard your voice; Quinny, come to me," cried Miss Em faintly.

"The Lord of Heaven be praised, she's mendin' at last!" gasped the old woman, as with the great unheeded tears rolling down her cheeks she rushed into the room and fell down by the bedside in a paroxysm of thankfulness and joy.

CHAPTER XXX

EDGED TOOLS

"'Twas a near thing, Miss Em," said Dr. MacShamus a week later as he sat by the bedside of his patient.

She smiled faintly, more at the old nickname which still clung to her than from any self-congratulation caused by the remark itself.

"A mighty near thing," he repeated; "and let me warn you that you'll suffer the consequences for a long time yet. Your only safeguard is to live a perfectly natural, easy life. No false excitement, no strain on mind or brain. Thank God there's no further need for it now! You ought to have all you can wish for here, and the quieter you live for some time the better."

"Will you let every one know that, doctor?" she said eagerly. "Coming from you it would have a good effect; not be put down to meanness, or inability on my part. The more you can spread it about the better."

"Oh! faith, I'll do that for you," said the doctor. "But why should you suppose people would be giving *you* the character of meanness at this time o' day? 'Tis quite the other way about. You were always inclined too much for generosity, not to say extravagance."

She clasped her thin white hands convulsively. "All my life," she said, "I have wanted money, I have longed to be rich; and now——"

"Well, you've got your wish," said Dr. MacShamus; "and what would you be flinging your money about for, entertaining other people? Shure, that's just foolishness. Take care of yourself, and don't stint yourself in anything you fancy. Above all, keep your mind free from worry. There's nothing to fear *now*," he added impressively as he met her eye.

A swift hot flush crept up to her temples. She made no reply.

"Your position is safe; no one can harm you, however ill-natured they are," he went on. "I'm not saying that Sir Jasper is a very lively or a very devoted husband; but you knew well enough what sort of a

man you were marrying, so that's enough about it. You've got to think of yourself now. Remember, I'm speaking very seriously. You've had a hard life, and you've *lived* it, you broke down at last. If ever such a thing happens again to you——"

He paused; his impressive clasp rested a moment on her trembling hands.

"Well?" she questioned, and her strangely bright eyes met his fearlessly. "I'm not afraid to hear the consequences; what are they?"

"You'd go mad—or die," he answered gravely.

There was a long thoughtful pause.

She broke it at last.

"Tell me, doctor, did I ever say anything all that time you know, about——about——"

"Never a word," he answered quickly; "only nonsense about dresses and parties and 'going nap,' which I suppose you'll be doing again as soon as you're up and about. 'Tis only in books, you know, that the heroine lets out her love affairs and her most cherished secrets. We medical men know how close a hold the brain keeps on what affects the mind. People babble of all the nonsense imaginable; as a rule, their real nature seems to get topsy-turvy. It's a queer thing. The saintly ones take to swearing and bad language generally, and the bad ones to praying and psalm-singing, the clever ones to foolishness, and the foolish ones to learned discourses."

Miss Em gave a sigh of relief. "I'm glad I didn't make a fool of myself. It's been on my mind ever since I recovered my balance."

"Well, rest assured you've not betrayed anything; and now I'm not going to stop here talking any longer. It won't do to excite you. Sleep as much as you can; that's the medicine you need, and no gossiping with Quinlan or Molly. On the whole," he added with a sly twinkle in his eye, "perhaps Miss Lustrell would be the best nurse for you—not so much temptation to talk, eh?"

Miss Em shuddered. "Oh, what a threat! I simply can't endure her presence. Doctor," she went on hurriedly, "am I very much altered by all this? Don't think it's vanity—indeed, indeed it's not. I know they've cut my hair off, and I suppose I look a queer object; but they won't give me a glass to look at myself, and I've been thinking there's a reason for it."

"Reason? Pooh! What reason should there be?" scoffed the doctor. "Shure, you'll be as handsome as ever when you get your flesh and your colour again. Wait till you're out of bed and then you can have your looking-glass. You feminine creatures are all alike, Miss Em. Vanity—vanity!"

A little wan smile hovered over the pale lips. "Are we? Then give me a hand-glass, doctor, or I shall think there is some very strong reason for your refusing."

He looked at her gravely, and his eyes grew a little misty before that thoughtful survey was ended.

Then he went over to the dressing-table and brought an ivory hand-mirror from among the various objects of use or uselessness scattered there.

Without a word he gave it her. One quick glance, and with a little sharp cry her hand went to her head, clutching its short soft curls with wondering horror.

They were white as snow!

* * * * *

The quiet monotonous days drifted by, each one bringing strength and calm to the long-taxed brain; full of gentle tendence, of thoughtful care, of tireless devotion.

Peace and tranquillity alone breathed in the atmosphere of that room. No alien voice, no harsh intrusion, no disturbing suggestion of or from the outer world ever found entrance through those jealously guarded doors.

The deepest and most restful pause Miss Em's life had ever known was this time of convalescence, while the spring deepened into summer and the warm and lovely air came through the open windows as she lay on her couch, resting and dreaming, incapable of exertion, almost even of thought, content just to lie there and be nursed and cared for like a child.

A deeper and more spiritual beauty had stolen into her expression. The worn anxious look had left her; the white rings and ripples about her brow seemed to accentuate her dark eyes and lashes, her clear colourless skin looked almost transparent in its delicacy.

Molly used to survey her with admiring wonder.

"You dear lovely Cleopatra!" she exclaimed one day as she stood surveying her, "age certainly *can't* wither you, nor custom stale your charms. You are more beautiful than ever! I wish you could see what a picture you make in that pale blue gown."

Miss Em smiled at the girlish flattery. "Ah, Molly," she said, "my day is over. I feel it at last. I used to think I never could get old—never be tired of life, excitement, gaiety. But I've had my warning, dear; I've been so close to the borderland that something of its chill breath is with me still. I've looked into mysteries that I can't forget. I'll never be the woman I was—not that *that* is anything to regret perhaps," she added softly.

Molly was silent.

The "Miss Em" of the present was apt to startle her at times by the contrast with that gay, fun-loving, reckless spirit she had so long known. This quiet, dreaming woman with her deep sad eyes and grave smile was so totally different, that the change would have alarmed her, if it had not been accounted for by the nature of her illness and the serious warnings of Dr. MacShamus; warnings which had made even Miss Sabina considerate, and Sir Jasper—neutral.

Indeed, that expression best suits this admirable gentleman at this period. He was neutral in affection, feeling, behaviour. He had decided, in the comparative loneliness of those past weeks, that his second experiment in matrimony had not been successful; but, in the first struggle for supremacy he had come out conqueror, and he meant to retain his position.

This strange and unexpected illness of his wife's had altered his plans for a time, but not the feeling that had led him to form those plans. It had modified their first harshness and intolerance, but had not placed her actions or code of morals before him in a more favourable light.

The position of Adventuress and Fool were the relative positions they held towards each other in his review of the situation. It was not a review that pleased his morbid, selfish nature. He had never adored women theoretically: his estimate of them was too low, and his mind too fastidious. It was impossible to reconcile such contradictory elements, so he permitted the exigencies of nature, as interpreted by centuries of manly

prejudice, to sway any sentiment that had the misfortune to obtrude itself on his notice.

When danger was over, and he knew that his wife's position in his household and the county generally must be established on a decisive basis, he held long and uncomfortable debates with himself in order to arrive at a satisfactory decision with respect to that basis.

That she should feel the curb he determined, but he had no desire now to call on others to witness her humiliation.

He felt sorry sometimes that he had asked his sister to return. Her rule was not comfortable, and her presence had in it something that was aggressively unfeminine to fastidious eyes. But by having re-established her at the castle he had aimed the first blow at his wife's independence, and that was an achievement he would not again forego.

Meanwhile the long wearisome days dragged themselves on. The old life with something burdensome in its old monotony was his once more. His marriage seemed at times a dream, at times a memory, that roused him to savage irritation; at times a piece of folly which was unpardonable, though capable of excuse.

The progress of the patient upstairs was now a steady progress from convalescence to health, and he had no longer any excuse for avoiding her, or postponing the explanation which both knew to be inevitable.

He had decided upon the interview one bright sunny spring morning.

There was something peculiarly suitable to his grim ironical frame of mind in the contrast afforded by the beauty and peace and fragrance of the world without, and the warfare of human passions within.

Miss Em lay on the couch in her dressing-room. She wore a morning-robe (as yet tea-gowns were *not*) of pale pink cashmere, the hue of a blush rose, some soft creamy lace was thrown about her head, a few shades deeper than the snowy curls clustering in profusion about her brow. A faint, very faint flush on her cheeks, and the most delicate accentuation of eyebrows were due to Quinlan's advice and assistance, for she was desirous of her mistress looking her "very best"; having more than a suspicion in her own keen mind that Sir Jasper had not fully appreciated the treasure he had won, or treated her with the consideration she deserved.

"'Tis all very well for Miss Peg, the darlin', to be pretendin' she doesn't mind that Miss Lustrell givin' herself the airs av a mistress, but I have my own opinions on that point," she said to herself. "She was axed here before the poor sowl was taken ill, an' I'd loike to have the findin' out av that reason, an' I will too, before I leave the castle."

When Sir Jasper entered the room, however, she only curtsied respectfully and then withdrew, just turning as she reached the door to remind her mistress that in half an hour she was to take her "tonic-medicine."

Sir Jasper touched his wife's extended hand and then seated himself beside her. The window was open, the blind partly drawn. A flood of sunshine bathed the outer terrace and garden, and lost itself in dim radiance where the great trees of the park stood in serried ranks, stretching out thick boughs and screening leafage for the noisy birds to rest and shelter in.

The fragrance of flowers was in the air, the table beside the invalid held masses of them arranged in bowl, or vase, by Molly's hands every morning.

In the stillness of the room the fragrance seemed almost oppressive. The monotonous buzz of an enterprising bee struck sharply on Miss Em's

attention; that and the quick throbs of her heart were strangely audible to her excited fancy.

As she grew calmer she turned her eyes expectantly on his face. For the first time she seemed to recognise the hardness and cruelty of it beneath that thin veneer of courtliness. For the first time she recognised that she had given herself to this man, solely and entirely, and thrilled with a sudden quick apprehension of the folly of her bargain.

"They assure me you are quite strong again," said Sir Jasper at last. He was surveying her critically, but without disapprobation. He had heard of the change in her hair, but this was the first time he had seen it. He confessed that it had only the effect of making her look distinguished, and in no way aged her beyond her actual years. That this change might bring her into stronger similitude with himself and render the contrast between their ages less remarkable, flashed through his mind, and left behind it a certain satisfaction, which, however, he had no intention of expressing.

"Strong?" she said in answer to his remark; "well, hardly that yet. But I am on the way to health and strength, I hope."

"You are prepared, of course, for some explanation of my words on the occasion of our first evening here," he said coldly. "I am here to offer it, and at the same time to lay down the rules which are to regulate our future life together."

He saw the quick flush of apprehension rise and die away. It argued a sense of power to wound her that was in itself an incentive and a gratification.

He leant back in his chair, balancing his delicate finger-tips and watching her face intently beneath his lowered eyelids.

"I say *together*, because in spite of your deception I do not choose to let the world know me as the dupe of an unprincipled woman."

"I am not *that*," she interposed haughtily, the old pride and fierceness and impetuosity waking as a soldier wakes at the cry of "battle," and rousing her to arms in self-defence. "My sins bear the excuse of youth and ignorance, never of actual vice. That I deceived you I grant, but you asked nothing of my past any more than I did of yours. I gave you, perhaps, a far better bargain than you had any right to expect. What degree of purity or single-mindedness does a man who has led your life, bring to a woman? What right has he to ask more from her than he can give in exchange?"

"These are not points on which to argue *with* a woman," answered Sir Jasper. "The same laws can never suit both sexes. At your time of life you must surely know that. You can't expect me to believe you took me with any of the squeamishness of girlhood left in you."

She grew white to the lips. "I should not advise you to ask *why* I took you," she said in a suppressed voice that vibrated with intense passion. "Nor to drive me too far by your method of regulating our position henceforward. There have been times in my life, before this, when neither man, nor angel, nor devil could hold me back from what I had set my mind on accomplishing!"

"That—I can well believe," he said with a curious chill smile hovering on his thin lips. "On the whole I'm not sure that I don't admire that side of your nature. It is dangerous, but interesting. It explains so much too in the ingenuous confessions of—'Peg, the Rake.'"

"Then you have that book in your possession!" exclaimed Miss Em, raising herself to a sitting position. "I know who sent it to you. Well, what do you intend to do?"

His cold keen glance held her fascinated yet rebellious; but that pride of race, so dominant within her, nerved her to defy where a weaker and more cowardly woman would have faltered. "What do you intend?" said nothing of what she herself chose to agree to; and again that sense of reluctant admiration fired the old baronet's tepid blood, and set before him an employment for future days and years that had the charm of novelty and the zest of danger.

"There is something of the tigress in all women who are worth caring for," he thought, as he recognised the daring and defiance of this one. "It is a type I have always appreciated—at a safe distance!"

Aloud he remarked: "My intentions with respect to our future attitude are based in a great measure upon the study of your character as portrayed in this interesting record." He drew out an old shabby, leather-covered pocket-book as he spoke, and began turning over the leaves with his thin wrinkled fingers.

"It might almost be called the 'Female Rake's Progress,'" he went on ironically. "As a study of some portions of feminine nature it is unequalled. I really feel almost grateful for the opportunity it has afforded me of seeing *below* the surface of a woman who has done me the honour to marry me, sooner than destroy her femininity by being consistent to the end of her days."

He paused, but the lowered eyelids and tightly compressed lips at which he glanced gave no response.

"Judging by this," he went on, closing the book and tapping the cover emphatically, "I have arrived at a better understanding of your complex character than even years of marriage would have afforded. I learn that you are ambitious of social success, that you love riches, that you have the sensuous female appreciation of all things beautiful and self-satisfying." He glanced round the room as he spoke, taking in every alteration which a sense of artistic fitness had brought about, every detail of colour and fragrance and beauty which surrounded the invalid. "Well," he went on slowly, "you wouldn't be a woman if you had not these tastes in a greater or less degree. I cannot, of course, flatter myself for a moment that you married me for any other reason than their complete gratification. It is, therefore, my intention to oppose that gratification by way of disciplining a character that is far from perfect."

Again he paused. Again he looked for response, but the face on the pillow neither changed nor winced.

She might not have heard him at all for any sign she gave; but he saw her hands tremble where they rested amidst the soft laces of her gown, and he knew that every cold and cruel phrase had hit its mark.

"Discipline," he went on, "is often the salvation of a reckless nature. This"—again he tapped the book emphatically—"this 'Peg, the Rake' appears singularly unfortunate in her utterly bad training and complete lawless liberty. Perhaps it is somewhat late in the day for interference, or any attempt to reform the evil of years. A young woman might be malleable and obedient; but a woman of—forty-two—is it not? well, no matter, we needn't be too exact,—a woman of Lady Lustrell's age, will naturally be more difficult of management. However, I do not despair.

You have achieved your ambition at last," he went on more rapidly; "you are the owner of a name and position such as your young ambition coveted. But, having given them to you in ignorance of what you really *were*, I intend to modify the gift in my own way. I—I presume you are listening; you are not faint or asleep, are you?"

The long lashes lifted themselves as swiftly as if the passionate glance of the flashing eyes had acted as a leverage to their restraining limits.

"No," she said; "I am all attention."

"Thank you. In the first place, then, you will be to all *real* intents and purposes a mere cypher in the house you have entered as mistress. All orders will be given through my sister, all entertainments I *may* deem necessary will be regulated and arranged by her; but you shall have the credit of them;—that I am willing to grant."

"The credit of Miss Lustrell's well-known bad taste and incompetency! Thank you, that is indeed an honour!" burst out Miss Em scornfully.

"It is honour enough for 'Peg, the Rake,'" said Sir Jasper icily. "But pray do not interrupt until I have finished. You will then be able to agree to, or refuse my terms. One of the laments in your beautifully frank confession is the constant want of money. Well, you doubtless consider you will never need to raise that lament again. But I must inform you that the allowance you will receive will be merely sufficient for your dress—in fact, the same amount as I allow my daughter and my sister. This sum alone will you possess while Heaven grants me life and opportunity to enjoy my own wealth. At my death there will, of course, be a provision made for you, a provision that is solely and entirely dependent on one condition."

"And that?"

"Surely you can guess. No? Well, the condition is that you *never* marry the man called Denis Morrison! Ah, have I hit you at last?"

"Hit me?" She raised her white face, so proud and beautiful in its calm defiance, that narrow-minded vengeance and bitter spite sank abashed like noxious things that felt their own foulness. "No," she said quietly; "you have not hit or hurt me, as you imagine. What if I tell you that so far from ever marrying Denis Morrison, I would not for all the world might offer accept him *now*? What if I told you that the very night before my marriage with you, he used every argument and persuasion to induce me to become his wife, and I refused? Refused wealth besides which *your* mortgaged fortunes sink into insignificance; refused the only love I ever returned in all my wasted reckless life! You look incredulous; you don't believe me. I tell you it is gospel truth! I could have made you the laughing-stock of the county; have seen you bite the dust as the old jilted fool that even I—I the woman you call Peg, the Rake—would not condescend to marry! I could have done this, and yet, I withheld my hand. I sent away the only man I have ever loved and took *you* for my husband! You!"—she laughed aloud. "They say there is madness in the O'Hara blood, you know; surely the taint of it was in me then!"

She threw herself back; a loud clear peal of laughter rang through the room. "Will you put that clause in your will, now?" she said, and laughed again.

He sprang to his feet white with rage and maddened by her mockery. At the same instant the door was hastily opened, and Quinlan appeared.

"Lord bless us and save us! Miss Peg darlin', you shouldn't be

excitin' yerself in this fashion. Sir Jasper, sir, axin' yer parding, what's the matter wid herself, at all, at all?"

"Oh, I'm all right, Quinny," said Miss Em, calming voice and face by a strong effort. "I was only laughing at something Sir Jasper was telling me; it was so entertaining. All the same I *am* a little tired. You'll excuse my sending you away, Sir Jasper, won't you? but I'm afraid I must."

She waved a playful dismissal as he turned abruptly away.

"And now, Quinlan, my tonic," she said.

CHAPTER XXXI

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL

"I DON'T believe her; I don't believe a word of it," muttered Sir Jasper, pacing to and fro his study in a fury that had no outlet. "She loves that man—she confessed it—and if I died to-morrow she would marry him. If he had been as well off as she says, she would have jumped at his offer, especially after——"

His thoughts broke off. He looked about in sudden bewilderment, and his hand went to the breast-pocket of his coat.

He uttered one word. It was a strong one. Then commenced a fruitless search in every pocket, and amongst the papers on his study table.

"I've left it in her hands! What a fool I am! Yes, it must have fallen and I never noticed. There'll never be a chance of getting it again; she'll take good care of that, and there's only my word against hers now. I've lost my trump card. Confound these women! why did I ever meddle with one again? Hadn't I lesson enough?"

He sank down beside the table, spent and trembling now his rage was over. "It was all so foolish after all, so exhausting, and in such bad taste; and a woman always got the best of it—somehow."

He sighed heavily; regret at his own failure was tantamount to remorse. He was sorry now he had risked a scene. But who would have calculated on the tables being turned on him in this fashion?

"In any case they shall not meet or speak while she's under my roof," he resumed presently; "I'll make that a condition, and I'll take good care it's kept. She must account for every hour of absence either to Sabina or myself. For the rest—well, her pride will have to give in. I shall enjoy seeing her 'do the honours' at our first dinner-party."

He sat there through the hot bright noon, brooding over his past life, and vainly trying to shape his present. A cold feeling of fear and aversion came over him as he pictured those wild defiant eyes, and heard again the echoes of that strange laughter. Suppose Fate chose to play him that trick? Suppose the wild strain in the O'Hara blood leapt into sudden madness? The shame and horror of the thought held him there spell-bound till he almost fancied he heard the slow cautious step, and the noiseless approach of the Thing that calls itself Insanity! In his home, about his hearth, ready to spring out of shadow and silence, this lurking terror appalled him by the very possibility of its advent.

He had had his warning once. It seemed to have sprung to life again in the shape of Memory. The memory of one woman framing the desperation of another affected his peace of mind and was therefore to be avoided.

But such avoidance means something more than a mere effort of will ; and he made that discovery at last.

"I'll not risk another scene," he said ; "I've told her what I mean to do. If she is wise she will submit. It is to her advantage, so doubtless she will."

* * * * *

Miss Em, taking counsel with herself after he had left her, came to that conclusion also. It was decidedly best to submit up to a certain point. She must not let the daylight of the world's knowledge into this darkened chamber. She must keep her skeleton well under lock and key, and let no rattle of chains betray its presence.

The effect of the interview with Sir Jasper had somewhat retarded her progress. Her nervous system was still too unstrung to bear excitement or any strong call upon its forces.

The quick eye of Quinlan noted this immediately, and her opinion of Sir Jasper as a husband grew more and more unfavourable.

It took all her skill and tact to soothe her mistress again, and avert the threatened hysteria.

It was while employed in alternately soothing and scolding that the old woman's foot struck against something on the floor close to the couch. She bent down to discover what it was, and lifted the old leather pocket-book to light, which had fallen from Sir Jasper's hand when he sprung up at that startling peal of laughter from his wife's lips. He had been too perturbed to notice its loss. Quinlan gave it to her mistress unconscious of its importance, and the vivid flush of joy in Miss Em's face was a revelation to her.

"My book !" she cried. "Oh, I've got it again, thank Heaven ! Oh, Quinny, what a stroke of luck ! He can't hurt me now ; he's got no proof."

Quinlan looked puzzled. "Proof, Miss Peg darlin' ? And what proof wud he be wantin' at all ? Shure, isn't it yerself is a thousand times too good for the likes av him ? Proof ? proof av what ? Is it certificates av birth and baptism as well as marriage lines that people are after wantin' nowadays ? Faith, the wurld is goin' topsy-turvy I'm thinkin'."

Miss Em laughed, and hugged her recovered treasure to her bosom with quite childish rapture. "No, no, Quinny dear ; it's only my old book I asked you about. The one I left behind me at Carrig-duve. Oh, Quinny ! if you had only found it in time what a world of trouble I'd have been saved !"

"And was they sich important documents, Miss Peg darlin' ? Shure, me tongue will niver remimber to call you 'my lady.'"

"Yes," said Miss Em thoughtfully ; "important enough to ruin my whole life henceforward."

"Ah, now, darlin', don't be after sayin' that ; shure, 'tis no great sin lies at yer door beyant jist a little divilment an' foolishness when ye were young an' the beauty av the place. Small wonder at that either, seein' the way the young men was after yez. An', shure, the little bit av a trick ye played yer father was nothin' so bad neither. Didn't we all know that it was with Dr. MacShamus ye were all the time, and wasn't it the masther hissself as brought ye home, jist as wild an' full av yer nonsinse and wickedness as iver ?"

The hot pained flush deepened in Miss Em's white face. She did not meet the old woman's kindly gaze, or give any response, but a sigh—long, quivering, full of pain remembered, of joy foregone. Then she sank back

amongst the soft cushions Molly had arranged for her comfort, and closed her eyes.

"I'm so tired, Quinny," she said. "Draw down the blinds and I'll try to sleep for an hour. Don't let any one disturb me."

When Quinlan looked in an hour later she found her mistress sleeping as peacefully as a little child, the old worn pocket-book still clasped in one hand.

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon before Miss Em woke, refreshed and invigorated by that deep, restful slumber. The room was full of tranquil shade and sweet fragrance, and in her hand was safely clasped her recovered treasure.

As she stirred and lifted her hand the soft flutter of a skirt came through the quiet room, and Molly appeared.

"What a long sleep!" she said. "And you've had no luncheon. You must take some jelly and champagne at once: Quinlan left it ready for you."

"Where is she?" asked Miss Em, surprised that such attendance as this was relegated to any one else.

Molly coloured and hesitated. "I'm sorry to say she has had to go back," she faltered.

"To go back! Do you mean to say she has returned to Carrig-duve, and in this manner, without even saying good-bye?"

"Well, dear, you see she really couldn't help it. She was sent for. Some one's ill there, and they want her."

"Is it Mrs. O'Hara?" asked Miss Em eagerly. "She's always complaining, yet she will never see a doctor, or take any remedies."

Molly had turned to the little table, and was busy opening the pint bottle of champagne.

"I believe it was your stepmother," she said. "But it was all so hurried, and poor Quinlan was so distressed that there was some confusion. I sent her back in the jingle that they sent, and if things are not very serious she will return to-morrow."

Miss Em looked searchingly at the girl's face as she came nearer, with the wine in her hand.

"Molly," she said abruptly, "is this the truth? Are you sure it wasn't your father who sent her away?"

"My father!" exclaimed the girl; "why, he doesn't even know she has gone. Dear Miss Em, whatever put such a strange idea into your head?"

"I don't know; I only thought perhaps he didn't like her coming here so unceremoniously; and as I am so much better, there really is no need for her to remain."

"Come, drink your wine and don't worry," said Molly. "You are in my hands now, you dear old lady, and I'm going to be a very strict nurse."

Miss Em held out her hand and pressed the girl's soft fingers. "I do think you're fond of me, Molly," she said.

"Fond of you! I should just think I was! I told you that when you spoke to me about marrying papa. Only I don't want to call you 'mother,' if you don't mind. Somehow I couldn't; you'll be always 'Miss Em' to me, you know."

"Call me anything you like, dear child, only don't cease to love me, Molly. A young fresh affection means so much to my old jaded heart."

And promise me you'll always believe the best of me, whatever you may hear; will you?"

"There never can be anything but the 'best of you' for me to hear," said the girl warmly. "I'll promise you that I won't believe it if there is."

Miss Em drank the champagne slowly, and made no remark. Molly drew up the blinds now, and the warm sunset glow flooded the room with its soft radiance.

"There! that's more cheerful," she said in her sweet coaxing voice. "How much better you look! Why, you'll soon be able to come downstairs again, and we can begin to wake up this old 'Castle Grim' as we promised."

All the colour died out of Miss Em's face.

"No, my dear, no," she said feebly; "I shall never be able to do that now. The will and the power have gone from me. For my own sake, I don't regret it; but for yours——"

"Will, indeed!" burst forth Molly impetuously. "And if you think I'm going to let you tumble down into an old woman you never were more mistaken in your life. Why, once you're about you'll be as bright and gay as ever you were; and I prophesy a rare good time for Castle Lustrell yet!"

Miss Em smiled a somewhat tremulous smile—one that made Molly inclined to lay her head down in her lap and cry. It was so pathetic, and so unlike that bright and cheerful smile which she had so long known.

"I wish," said Miss Em slowly, "that your prophecy may come true. Molly, why doesn't Paddy Kearney get your father's consent to your marriage? He knows you care for each other."

"Paddy is so poor," said Molly ruefully; "if he were only rich papa wouldn't hesitate. As it is"—and she sighed as the "maiden all forlorn" she deemed herself—"I suppose we must just wait and wait until we have worn out his patience. I have told him I shall never marry any one else. I often think," she added thoughtfully, "that it was Aunt Sabina who set him against Paddy. They hate each other! But you, dear Miss Em," she added, suddenly, "you will be able to talk papa over. You can influence him so, and——"

"I!" The sharp harsh cry startled Molly, and she looked in surprise at the drawn changed face. "I have no influence. You mistake; I can do nothing," Miss Em went on hurriedly. "Something—something you will never know, Molly, has altered my position here. I may *seem* the mistress of Castle Lustrell, but I am only a cypher. The part I play is but a stage part. I can't tell you more. I—I never meant to tell you this; but you would soon have found it out, and better you should know at once. Your aunt will be the real mistress, Molly; I—I am only——"

"Hush!" said the girl almost sternly; "I won't hear you lower yourself, dear Miss Em. If things are as you say I—I shall never appear to notice it. All the honour and respect that should be given to you as Lady Lustrell I will give, and make others give. We will fight together, if it is to be war; *stand* together, if it is to be defence. The household all love me, and for my sake they shall love you. Not one iota of dignity shall you lose, I can promise that, and you will find I am right. As for Aunt Sabina"—she drew her slight young form to its full height, and flashed defiance with her glowing eyes,—“she will have two against her now; let her do her worst.”

The colour and warmth came back to Miss Em's face. The situation suited her exactly, and a thrill of the old defiant spirit ran through her veins; but the day had passed for *that*; she felt it now, as curbed and restrained by sad hopelessness the momentary passion died out, leaving her cold and passive.

"Dear child," she said softly, "you mean all you say, I am sure; but, believe me, submission—outward submission—is best; and don't flourish our alliance in their faces, Molly, it would only lead to fresh troubles. They might part us, and then——"

Her voice broke, she looked lovingly at the beautiful young face. "I shall never have a child of my own to love, and they say without that no woman's life is complete; but no child could be dearer to me than you are, Molly, and to lose you would almost break my heart. I could give you to the man you love, I could bear to see you leave me a happy wife, blessed in the devotion of a good man's life; but I could not bear to know you were sent away from here because—because I loved you."

"No one could do that, dear Miss Em; my father wouldn't be so cruel, even though he is jealous; and as for Aunt Sabina——"

"How do you know your father is jealous?" questioned Miss Em sharply.

"Oh, I have learnt it in a hundred ways. He likes to be first and foremost in the affections of any one he cares for; he would never *show* that he was jealous of your loving me, but he would make you feel it; he has always been like that."

Miss Em remained silent and thoughtful. She was thinking of that clause in Sir Jasper's will. In Molly's unconscious words she read its *real* meaning.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HEADLESS COACH

THE summons to Carrig-duve had been imperative enough to alarm Quinlan, and render the call of loyalty more imperative than that of affection. For it was her master who lay at death's door, stricken down suddenly by that worst foe of age—paralysis.

The stroke had been swift and without any sort of premonition; and Mrs. O'Hara, who was something of the "braggart in peace and coward in war" type, was terrified out of her wits, and despatched messengers for Dr. MacShamus and Quinlan, and even telegraphed to her arch-foe Miss Bedelia, without loss of time.

The whole house was in confusion when Quinlan arrived. The Irish servant whom she had left behind her could only express herself as "*that moithered*, she couldn't be afther tellin' what to do an' what to lave." And to simplify that condition of mind she proceeded to "lave" everything, and wander about the house with her apron to her eyes, calling on all the saints in the calendar of her memory to be merciful to the house and its occupants.

Quinlan took the helm and proceeded to right affairs with all promptness. The dejection and submission of Mrs. O'Hara were matters of wonder to her, but she refrained from noticing them specially.

A talk with Dr. MacShamus convinced her that there was every cause

for alarm, and she braced herself for the situation with all the courage and devotion that a loyal Irish servant undoubtedly possesses.

So little could be done. The old man lay like a log, unconscious of anything around him. Save for the heavy stertorous breathing one would not have known he lived.

The night fell, but his condition remained unchanged.

Quinlan announced her intention of sitting up with him, but Mrs. O'Hara declared she would share the watch. The old woman was none too pleased at the companionship, and gave very brief response to her mistress's efforts at conversation.

She had a rooted conviction that Mrs. O'Hara wanted to "pump" her respecting Castle Lustrell and its affairs, and she was determined to give her no satisfaction on these points.

In order, however, to keep up the dignity of the family she was scrupulously exact in speaking of Miss Em as "my lady" or Lady Lustrell, the more so as her keen eye detected that this was extremely annoying to her listener.

Mrs. O'Hara at last changed the conversation abruptly.

"I wish, Quinlan," she said after a pause, "that you would stop this idle gossip in the kitchen about the thing they call the 'Headless Coach.' It's ridiculous the way they've been going on about it. Bridget flatly refuses to go on an errand after dusk, and the boy is nearly as bad."

Quinlan crossed herself hastily. "Musha, ma'am, and why wouldn't they be frightened? Well they know what it manes; shure, 'tis very well for you to be sayin' it's nonsense; maybe ye have no raisin to fear, not bein' a rale O'Hara, but whin the quality gits a warnin' av that sort, 'tis a sarious thing, let me tell ye."

"Well, I don't believe these superstitions," said Mrs. O'Hara sharply; "the Banshee, and the White Lady, and the Headless Coach, they're all imaginary and all nonsense."

"Shure, *ye've* no call to believe in thim," snapped Quinlan, touched in her tenderest point by such criticism of valued superstitions; "but any one who has lived in the good ould families knows that sich warnin's do come to thim; and as for the coach——"

"Hush!" said Mrs. O'Hara suddenly, "what was that—wheels? . . . and at this time of night. It can't be the doctor again—or Miss O'Hara?"

"Whist wid ye?" cried Quinlan, turning white as death; "faith, and 'tis jist bringin' a judgmint on the house perhaps ye are, wid yer scoffin' an' haythin principles."

They both listened intently. The night was very still, scarce a breath of air was stirring; and distinctly audible in that stillness was the sound of wheels coming slowly up the avenue. Mrs. O'Hara sprang to her feet, and going to the window threw it open and looked out. A strange stifled cry escaped her.

"My God! Quinlan!—*What* is it?"

Shaking in every limb the old woman followed her, and they stood side by side watching the strange weird vehicle approach—a black hearse-shaped carriage, drawn by four horses, whose feet made no sound, and whose heads were muffled in some shroud-like drapery.

The full clear light of the moon shone on the strange thing, and showed it with startling clearness to the terrified eyes of the two women.

At the great entrance door it paused. The noiseless steeds stood still,

their strange muffled head-gear distinctly visible. Then the driver lifted his head; and a skeleton face, with the moon-rays lighting its ghastly outlines, looked straight up at the window of Mrs. O'Hara's room.¹

With a wild scream she fell to the floor in a dead faint; but Quinlan, instead of attending to her, rushed over to the bedside of her master. As she looked at the motionless form a strange grey shadow flickered over the face. There was a faint quiver of the closed lids, a fainter sigh from the white lips, and the last of the male line of O'Haras had passed into rest.

* * * * *

"Wisha! wisha! an' how shall I tell Miss Peg? Shure, 'twill nigh kill her, and she scarce recovered from sickness herself," lamented Quinlan.

The terrible night was over. The bright sunshine streamed into the desolate rooms despite closed blinds.

A great peace and quiet reigned everywhere.

Dr. MacShamus had ordered Mrs. O'Hara to keep her bed. She was still suffering from the shock of the preceding night, and passive as a lamb in any one's hands.

"How shall I tell Miss Peg at all, at all?" That was Quinlan's one thought, whether expressed or not.

The doctor could not help her.

He had a horror of scenes and of what is called "breaking the news." Long acquaintance with female nerves and female nature had not hardened him. Their way of taking sorrow, whether pathetic, stony, or hysterical, was always trying to witness. He therefore made no suggestion, such as Quinlan hoped, but simply advised her to drive over to Castle Lustrell with the least possible delay, for "ill news flies apace" in Ireland, where the very crows must carry information, so swiftly does it travel from place to place.

The administration of a soothing draught to Mrs. O'Hara promised a few hours' respite; and leaving Bridget in charge, Quinlan some half-hour later took her place in the jingle Dr. MacShamus had ordered, and was driven to the castle in the usual break-neck fashion of Irish drivers.

"Well, glory be to God I'm alive, an' that's all!" she exclaimed as she at last reached her destination. "Pat, ye young *omadhaun*! it's a good batin' ye want, drivin' that poor craythur for all the wurld as av yez was race-coorsin' in Cork, an' me bones that stiff and sore from want av me night's rest. Av ye takes me back like yez brought me, I'll just lay the information at yer father's, an' sorra a bit will he be trustin' ye wid that horse agin, lave alone the jingle, though, faith, 'tis evin worse than ould Jack Cotter's."

The boy grinned approvingly. "That's thrue for ye, ma'am," he said. "'Tis jist a wonder that it houlds together. But it makes a foine match for the harness, anyway."

"*Harness!*" scoffed Quinlan; "arraah now, is it harness yer after callin' it? Thim bits o' rope and sthraps o' leather! foine harness, an' the poor baste knows it. Shure, he only stays inside thim shafts out av perliteness. There's divil a bit o' sthrap wud kape him unless he'd a mind to be kept, havin' been so long in the family."

The boy only laughed, and steered his animal round to the stable-yard,

¹ This Irish superstition is vouched for by an eye-witness of the event described

in lively expectation of a feed for both, though the castle of late years had not been famous for any sort of hospitality.

Meanwhile, with beating heart and trembling limbs, Quinlan entered the hall and asked to see Molly.

She felt she could not face Miss Em with her bad tidings just at first.

The girl came tripping down the wide shallow stairs looking as radiant as the morning.

"You've come back! oh, I'm so glad. Then it wasn't serious after all? Why—Quinlan?"

The sad look and tearful eyes of the old woman spoke of some fatality, and checked her light words.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"It's—the master himself, miss dear," faltered Quinlan. "Shure, he's been taken—God rest his sowl! An' how am I to tell Miss Peg? Shure, 'twill go nigh to kill her. They were that fond o' one another always—and the suddenness av it."

"What was it?" asked Molly sympathetically; "accident or illness?"

"Shure, 'twas both, Miss Molly dear. A stroke, the doctor calls it, an' he niver spoke nor stirred a limb till the call came, and thin 'twas jist a sigh, an' as peaceful as a babe that sinks to slape. Ah, wisha, wisha! 'tis a bad day for Carrig-duve. He was the kind gentleman and the good master, and sad it is to think av the ould place goin' to strangers, for, shure, Mrs. O'Hara hasn't the falins nor the ways of the family at all; not but what the poor woman's in a sad way with the shock, and the grief, and one thing wid another. But there I go runnin' off wid talkin' this an' the other, and Miss Peg waitin' to hear. Is she fairly well this mornin', miss? How did she slape, the darlin'?"

"Very well, I think," answered Molly. "I was in the dressing-room all night, and I never heard a sound from her, and she told me this morning she felt much better."

"Ah, may the heavens be yer bed, miss, that's good news; though how she'll be whin I tell her this——"

"She knows you're here, Quinlan," interrupted Molly; "for Dwyer came to tell me when I was in her room, so the sooner you go to her the better. She'll be wondering what we are talking about. Poor Mr. O'Hara," she added; "he seemed such a dear old gentleman."

"Ah! thrue for ye, miss, he was *that*, but it's a bad time he's had av it one way an' another. The mistress—well, 'tis well known that she has the timper, an' not his sowl could he call his own these many years. Howsomdiver, I'll not be gossipin' here any longer, miss. Shure, 'tis a hard task I've got before me; the Lord lend me strength!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

COUNTER-PLOTTING

SPRING and summer, seedtime and harvest had run their course for one brief year.

It seemed long enough to the Lady of Castle Lustrell—a period of dulness, dreariness, and depression such as she had never known. But dull and uneventful as the months had been, they had brought with them

health and strength, and such measure of restfulness as she could not but recognise as beneficial.

In a way, too, Fate had played into her hands. Sir Jasper's intention to humiliate her had signally failed. The state of her health was quite sufficient reason for Miss Sabina's re-appearance; and when Lady Lustrell explained to the household, with a gracious dignity all her own, that she must waive the privilege of direction and give the control of domestic affairs to her sister-in-law, not one of the servants thought it in any way strange, although they disapproved strongly of the arrangement.

The death of Mr. O'Hara had been a great shock to his only child, and for a time she had been quite prostrate with grief, and Dr. MacShamus almost expected a recurrence of the brain trouble. But she rallied once more, and then followed months of enforced and absolute retirement that in themselves explained to the county generally the reason of Lady Lustrell's withdrawal from all society. Not a soul ever suspected what good cause she had to be grateful for such an explanation.

Miss Lustrell herself could not be blind to the fact that the relationship between husband and wife was of the most strained description. The ordinary civilities of life alone passed between them, and even these were savoured by bitter ironies and cynical innuendoes on the part of the old baronet. But the skill and tact which long practice had made habitual enabled Miss Em to ignore the sense of inferiority which was being forced upon her.

Again and again she had come out conqueror from these passages of arms, and Sir Jasper felt that she was so, and grew more bitter and more resentful. She obeyed every injunction, and *seemed* to carry out every wish, and yet he knew that in spirit she thwarted each, and by a hundred subtle methods avoided his tyranny.

With the passage of time some of the old brightness and light-heartedness seemed to come back to her; only she herself knew of the transforming change that at times showed her the old nature—its hopes ruined, its pleasures destroyed, its strength enfeebled.

Every new shock of humiliation added bitterness to the growing hatred she felt for her husband. It was a hatred distilled from poison-seeds of wounded pride and self-effacement; a hatred which she *feared*, for its intensity was almost prophetic of active results.

But the long dark desolate year was over, and the castle might at last throw off its cloak of mourning.

Miss Sabina had hinted at this, and observed that the refusal of invitations by no means released the recipients from obligations connected with their return.

Sir Jasper listened to these remarks with some of his old grim humour. Probably there would be a fight between the two women at last. He was prepared to encourage one.

However, there was no discernible shade of difference in Miss Em's manner. She merely said a dinner-party to include *every one* responsible for the long list of unaccepted invitations would be rather a formidable undertaking.

"Oh! let us have a ball!" cried Molly eagerly. "A real big proper ball in the old ballroom. Something to which every one can come, and which will sweep them all off the lists of 'to be, or not to be'—invited."

Her father looked at her with frowning brows.

"A ball, indeed! Do you suppose I'm going to have the whole place turned upside down to please *you*?" Then he glanced sharply at his wife. "Has Lady Lustrell no suggestion to offer?" he asked with frigid politeness.

Miss Em gave a scarcely perceptible shrug of her shapely shoulders.

"No," she said with perfect indifference; "you must arrange it between yourselves. I see no particular reason for burning incense before the shrine of popularity. We have accepted nothing. I imagined we were to continue as we had begun."

Sir Jasper leaned back in his chair and surveyed her critically.

The discussion was taking place at breakfast-time.

"Now, I wonder what the deuce she means?" he reflected. "If I thought she would rather evade a public recognition of her new dignity, I should insist upon it."

Miss Sabina looked from one to the other and pursed up her thin lips significantly. "Of course," she said, "if neither of you wish to keep up the reputation of the castle I have no more to say on the subject. It would be a great expense saved."

"That," said Miss Em, "should decide the question at once."

"It does," said Sir Jasper, his thin delicate face flushing faintly. "We will give the ball, and ask every one."

"Miss Lustrell will, of course, arrange the details," said Miss Em, with perfect indifference. "I don't care to undertake such a responsibility."

"We could manage the supper in the house," said Miss Sabina thoughtfully.

"With such a cook!" flashed out Miss Em. Then she coloured, and, with her usual readiness of resource, said playfully: "It would be a praiseworthy experiment. She might have Quinlan to assist, if you think it advisable."

"Certainly not," snapped Sir Jasper. "I don't choose to have any one else's servants interfering in my kitchen. What the cook can't manage must be ordered from Dublin. See to that, Sabina."

He rose, apparently unobservant of his sister's look of dismay and Molly's smiles of delight. As for his wife, her face was as inexpressive as a block. She had learnt of late to make it so, and he chafed at her success. This sleepy-eyed indifference to all that was passing around her was delusive he knew, but he could not combat it except by personal affront, and, as yet, he hesitated to offer *that*.

His first anger at her deception towards him was in some degree mollified by the docility with which she had accepted his orders, and the obedience she never failed to display to any expressed wish. But in his heart a lurking jealousy gnawed cruelly and incessantly.

Jealousy of herself, her thoughts, her spirit—which might bow but never break—her ready wit, her ability to seem gay, amused, indifferent, defiant, as the fancy seized her.

"She has a demon in her to match the worst man that ever lived, I believe," was his verdict, after a year of watchfulness and coercion. But he knew that demon would always escape *him*, and was never quite safe to arouse, since chain and weapon were taken out of his hands. He could not, for his own credit's sake, rake up an old scandal, more especially one that in no way reflected on his credit, or added to his dignity. There lay the secret of her real supremacy, that uncapturable defiance which for ever mocked at his ostensible victories.

Now, from under her lowered lids she watched him leave the room, and a quiet smile of amusement flickered over her lips. "Let them arrange their ball as they please," she thought to herself. "I shall play the part of guest, and criticise instead of entertain. It would be rather amusing for Sir Jasper, if the rumour got about that his wife was a little off her head. The county may come *once*, but I fancy it rests with myself if they ever come again; and yet I never thwart a command of his or oppose a wish."

"Emilia!" exclaimed Miss Sabina sharply, "I have twice asked you a question, and you sit there like a deaf person, smiling at nothing. *Will* you give me your attention?"

Miss Em rose to her feet and shot one sharp irritated glance at her sister-in-law.

"No," she said defiantly; "I will not. My wishes go for nothing here, so I shall keep my opinions to myself. You may arrange things just as you please; manage, or muddle, it's all the same to me! The only questions of any importance as far as I'm concerned are the date and my dress."

"Well!" gasped Miss Sabina; but Lady Lustrell was sweeping out of the room, her head loftily erect, her soft black draperies trailing on the old worn carpet, her face, could she but have seen it, beaming with mischievous delight.

* * * * *

"Oh! my dear Miss Em, why did you do it!" exclaimed Molly, a few minutes later, as she followed her stepmother into her boudoir.

"Do—what?" asked Miss Em, turning from the contemplation of the May glories to the wistful, lovely face beside her.

Strangely wistful and pale it had grown of late, losing the girlish bloom and radiance, and gaining instead the thoughtful yet sadder shadows that are the gifts of experience.

"Well, of course I mean letting Aunt Sabina have the management of this ball—if ball it is to be. Perhaps you don't know how dreadful her parties can be. The dinners are bad enough, goodness knows! She'd spoil everything for the want of an additional pound of butter, or dozen of eggs; and she'd grudge the fruit, though we have so much of it. I believe myself, she sells it, and has a private agreement with the gardener. But, as I was saying, the dinners were nothing when compared with the evening parties!"

She wrung her hands in comic despair. "And now you're going to let her give a ball—and in *your name*!"

No italics could give any idea of the emphasis she laid on those two words. Surely it was bad enough to perpetrate a failure; but to get the credit of that failure, wrongfully, that did indeed seem the height of folly.

Miss Em only smiled at the impetuous outburst.

Her eyes turned again to the beauty of the landscape in all the blossoming loveliness of May—the snow and rose tints of petals, the gold of sun-touched leaves, the vivid green of boughs against the sky's intense blue. Lustrell Park was at its fairest in these early months of summer, and she had not yet wearied of that fairness.

"My dear Molly," she said at last, "have not we both agreed not to vex our heads about anything they do *here*? Now to me, half the fun of the entertainment will be watching the way Miss Sabina carries it out. All the anxiety will be *hers*, all the amusement mine. I would say *ours*, only you seem inclined to look at the serious side."

"Yes, I do," answered Molly, "because you see, dear, I—*know* what it is."

"Then you ought to be all the more ready to laugh. After all, what does it matter? I don't care a straw for the people, or what they say or think. In Dublin it would be a different matter, I grant; but for these old county fogies——"

"But it's to be a *ball*," reiterated Molly; "there won't be so many fogies at *that*. And the young ones are so keen; and Paddy will come, you know, and he'll expect to find everything so different under your *régime*."

"True, I forgot Paddy," said Miss Em thoughtfully. "Well, Molly asthore, I see nothing for it but a trick, and you must aid and abet me. We'll have two suppers, and in two different rooms! What do you say?"

"Lovely!" cried Molly, her eyes sparkling. "But how on earth can you manage?"

Miss Em laughed. "I'll manœuvre all that," she said, her eyes glowing with the old rakish enjoyment of long ago. "Trust me, my dear; we'll have *our* supper from Dublin, and Miss Sabina shan't know a word about it. As for waiting, I'll have Quinlan round unbeknown to any one, and our maid Dwyer is clever enough, and that young footman Macan—I daresay we can smuggle him away. Now the question is, what room? It must be one that no one enters, or is likely to require for that occasion, and we must have our own password for our party when the time arrives, and separate them skilfully. Oh, faith, 'twill be diverting enough, and make up for many a long day's boredom we've had with them."

Molly laughed ecstatically, "'Twill be the grandest fun I've ever had," she said. "Only I suppose we shall catch it afterwards."

"My dear child," said Miss Em mockingly, "did you ever hear of the Irishman yet who spoilt a bit of devilment for sake of that word 'afterwards'? No, nor an Irishwoman either, and it isn't Peg O'Hara (though I'm not that now) that's going to begin."

Molly surveyed her with gentle wonder. What a chameleon she was! And how did it happen that anything in the way of mischief or wickedness always called up that touch of the "brogue," and banished the set intonation and unreal suavity which was characteristic of her ordinary manner?

So far as absolute discussion went, Miss Em's plot was in a somewhat sketchy state; she preferred it to "simmer," she told Molly.

So for several days no more was said about it, though Miss Em's brain was actively at work in elaborating her first design. The thought of Paddy Kearney fired her energies; he, at least, must never know how doubtful a position she held in her own house, and he would enjoy more than any one the plot which she had determined upon carrying to a successful issue.

Meanwhile days flew by, and acceptances began to fall in showers of polite unanimity. Miss Em was secretly delighted and outwardly indifferent. Side by side, however, with Miss Sabina's list she framed her own, arranged her supper-table, and paired off *her* respective couples.

The whole of the youthful and mirth-loving contingent were to be swept off in her train; Miss Sabina and Sir Jasper could do what they pleased with the dowagers and fogies.

It was necessary to confide in Miss Bedelia to some extent, as she had to

be entrusted with the Dublin order; but she imagined Miss Em's injunctions as to *strict* secrecy was only part of her love of mystery, and that she was "up to something" at last.

The old lady had of course received an invitation, as had also Lady Pat, and both had accepted. They would therefore have to share in Miss Em's plan, as she fully intended to include them among *her* guests.

"Faith, Molly, 'twill be a nice party," she said; "only, let us pray your aunt won't go spying about and discover *this* room, or we're lost."

The room in question was a quaint octagonal chamber—once the schoolroom—that for years had been given over to dust and lumber. By dint of watching their opportunities Molly and Miss Em and the girl Dwyer had weeded out all the rubbish, and so cleaned and re-arranged the place that no one could have recognised it.

The arrangements had been skilfully and quietly conducted, and not a soul except those concerned in the plot ever dreamt of what was going on.

Every one else in the house was busily occupied with preparing the great ballroom—a work of no small pretensions; but Miss Sabina insisted it should be done by the servants, and would give no extra help. There was much grumbling and ill-temper displayed, and a general amount of disorder and confusion that secretly delighted Miss Em, and was also a good cover for her own and Molly's handiwork.

Over two hundred people were expected; of the number Miss Em had selected forty for her own supper-party—twenty pairs of choice spirits who would think Lady Lustrell's surprise the best part of the entertainment.

As the day approached, Molly was in a state of nervous trepidation for fear of discovery. Miss Em, on the other hand, was cool and composed, and brimming over with enjoyment at the prospect of "turning the tables" so completely.

Sir Jasper could not understand her apparent indifference to the great occasion. Finally, he put it down to sullenness at the insignificant part she was allowed in the whole matter, and deriving some gratification from this belief, he awaited the evening of the ball with complacent curiosity.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"A SOUND OF REVELRY BY NIGHT"

SIR JASPER and Miss Lustrell were awaiting their guests in the small drawing-room that opened into the ballroom of the castle. Lady Lustrell had not yet appeared, and the old baronet was fuming and fidgeting at her dilatoriness.

Her constant unpunctuality was one of his causes of complaint against her, but neither wrath nor irony seemed to amend the habit.

The sound of wheels was distinctly heard when she hurried into the room, followed by Molly. Sir Jasper and his sister started as they looked at the regally magnificent woman who walked up the room buttoning her gloves and apparently quite unconscious of the sensation she created.

A magnificent court train of rich emerald-hued velvet worn over a dress of soft black lace, and caught here and there with jet, composed her toilette. Her white hair was swept off her brow, dressed high, and powdered. She wore not a single ornament to detract from the faultless

contour and milky whiteness of throat and bust. Her arms were bare to the elbow, and guiltless even of a bracelet; but she looked so splendidly handsome that Miss Sabina grew green with envy, and Sir Jasper could scarcely remove his eyes from her.

Molly looked somewhat pale and anxious, and her dress of pure white silk with trails of May blossom rather enhanced her pallor. She was terribly uneasy, and full of misgivings as to the success of the plot. But no misgivings troubled Miss Em; she was always in her element when mischief was on, and never had she perpetrated such a glorious piece of daring as this.

How she had managed was still a mystery to Molly, although they had only both rushed in that very moment from a last visit to the supper-room.

It was a scene of beauty that perfectly dazzled the girl. Flowers and plants hid all the "bad corners," as Miss Em called them. Plate and glass hired from Dublin glittered on the table and buffet; dainty dishes, piles of exquisite fruit and wines of the choicest brands all promised unlimited enjoyment to the revellers.

The lights were not numerous enough to show up deficiencies, or betray "toilet secrets." Everything was soft and dim, and restful to the eye; a picture to please any sense of artistic fitness in the guests, without too forcibly diverting their attention from each other.

For conviviality was Miss Em's watchword, and she had made a judicious selection of "kindred souls" who would ably second her own lead in that line.

Meanwhile people began to arrive in quick succession, and Lady Lustrell had enough to do in receiving them.

The younger members passed on into the ballroom, where the band had already commenced to play. The elder lingered in the drawing-room or hall, where card-tables and seats gave promise of comfort and entertainment more in keeping with their years.

In a very short space of time the ballroom presented a magnificent *coup d'œil*. Uniforms, dresses, jewels, faces pretty and plain, forms manly and meagre, all the curious and heterogeneous contrasts which mean "social enjoyment" were here displayed.

To Miss Em this return to her old well-loved life after so long an eclipse, was as the taste of blood to the tiger. A few moments, and all her good resolutions were thrown to the winds. She was talking, laughing, jesting, arranging, in the old bright resistless way. The flashing lights, the happy faces, the strains of the music, all combined to fire her blood, and make her, as of old, the centre of all that was wittiest, gayest, and most reckless in the crowd. Old faces smiled familiar welcome, and lips long silent bandied familiar jests. Here and there the electric current of affinity attracted groups, and she was invariably one of the number, only breaking them up to form them afresh in kaleidoscopic changes whose variety possessed incessant charm.

Sir Jasper watched her with frowning brows. He felt he could do nothing to stop this torrent of popularity, nothing to subdue or crush this brilliant comet-like creature, who flashed here and there before his amazed eyes, everywhere receiving homage, flattery, attention, such as he had declared should never again be her portion.

Outwardly bland, but inwardly raging, he had to receive congratula-

tions long evaded, and doubly distasteful now. As for Miss Lustrell, she was furious. This excitement and restlessness and mobility of the hostess were far removed from *her* idea of manner and demeanour. She had been accustomed to a dignified and well-regulated mode of entertainment, and had certainly never behaved in the "harum scarum" way of Lady Lustrell. But the crowning shock of all was when the said Lady Lustrell laughingly announced to some dozen or so of the *élite* of "county foggydom"—"Do not please give me the credit of this delightful evening, you are all indebted to my sister-in-law for it. I merely look upon myself as a *guest*, like one of yourselves."

Foggydom gasped, and surveyed each other in astonishment as the emerald velvet train swept itself away into another circle; and, judging from the mirth and hilarity following its arrival, the effect produced was in contrast to the gloom left behind.

Time passed on; and the elder members of the assembly, chaperons, and wall-flowers, and card-players began to meditate upon the possibilities of supper. As a rule the suppers and dinners at Castle Lustrell were not of the very best description; but the advent of Lady Lustrell, and her well-known capabilities, promised that this occasion would vary agreeably from previous experiences.

Shortly before midnight Miss Sabina might have been observed peering anxiously about in nooks and corners, and varying this occupation by diving into her pocket or giving surreptitious shakes to her black satin skirts.

Her face gradually betrayed consternation, and at last she hurried up to Sir Jasper to confide the reason.

"I've lost my supper list," she whispered. "You know there were to be two detachments, and dancing was still to go on, and now I don't know how to arrange the people."

"Pooh, pooh," said the old baronet impatiently, "you can remember well enough without a list; or stay," he added quickly, "ask Lady Lustrell to manage it, she has all the names at her fingers' ends. Of course the young folk are to be left till the elders have finished. There can't be much difficulty."

Miss Sabina looked round for her sister-in-law. For once she felt she would be glad of her assistance.

It almost seemed as if Miss Em divined the necessity, for she appeared at this moment and suavely inquired if it was not time for supper.

"Of course it is," snapped Miss Sabina; "but unfortunately I've lost my list, and I can't remember how I had arranged the two parties."

"Oh! I'll do that for you," said Miss Em genially. "The old fogies, of course, go in first."

"I remember Lady Patricia and Dr. MacShamus were to be among them," began Miss Sabina, "and the Barringtons, and Sir Lucius and Lady Carew, and the Lovells and Mrs. O'Hara, and——" She ran through the names feebly, but Miss Em cut her short with a rapid gesture.

"Don't worry yourself," she said, and moved swiftly away to give the necessary hints. Sir Jasper moved off to the side of his appointed dowager, and Sir Lucius Carew, an old sexagenarian, but a noted county favourite, approached Miss Sabina.

Lady Lustrell had decided on going in with the second detachment.

A general move was soon apparent.

It was some time, however, before Miss Sabina discovered that not only was the dining-room crowded beyond the limits she had decided, but that a great many people were there who ought *not* to have been present, and a great many were absent whose places should decidedly have been among the elect.

However, it was impossible to alter anything now, and she had to make the best of affairs. She looked in vain for Lady Pat's dignified figure, or Dr. MacShamus's genial face, though his wife was there with old Mr. Barrington.

"So like Emilia!" she said to herself in vexation. "Just doing everything in that helter-skelter fashion of hers. It's not a bit what I had planned."

From time to time the strains of the band reached them, but there was no doubt that the party "hung fire" and were universally dull and bored. The supper itself seemed strangely insufficient for the large number who had crowded in; and Miss Sabina could not help thinking that the viands had considerably decreased since she had superintended the table.

Still the meal dragged itself on, and conversation, though more spasmodic than brilliant, did not seem to flag. It annoyed Sir Jasper that Sir Lucius Carew would get up on his feeble old legs and propose, with many senile chuckles and flatteries, the health of their beautiful and charming hostess. The speech was long and prosy, and Sir Jasper was bound to reply to it in the character of the "proud and happy husband" he had been called. The idea of toasts once started spread like an epidemic, and it seemed as if the second contingent would have to wait till morning for their chance of supper, when, at last, Miss Sabina in desperation rose from the table.

In pairs and groups they all struggled back to the ballroom, but on reaching it there was an involuntary exclamation of surprise.

It was perfectly empty.

The musicians were chatting and laughing, and occasionally twanging a string of harp or violin, but they had evidently ceased playing for want of the "dancers dancing in tune."

Miss Sabina turned to her brother, amazement depicted on her face.

"Why—where are all the others?" she gasped.

As if in answer there came a sudden peal of laughter, loud, clear, ringing, the laughter that could still make Sir Jasper's heart contract with icy horror; following it—the sound of voices, the clatter of glass, the unmistakable uproar of festivity—and very jovial festivity too. Sir Jasper turned suddenly in the direction of these remarkable sounds. One of the doors of the ballroom, curtained over for the occasion, opened into a passage at the end of which was a swing door of green baize. Through this door, down the passage he marched, every nerve of his body quivering with excitement and dread of he knew not what. After him came Miss Sabina, and following close on her a few more curious or more venturesome spirits than by right ought to belong to "fogydom."

Thrusting open this swing door with a nervous hand Sir Jasper was confronted by a scene that riveted him to the spot. He was unconscious of the crowding forms behind: he only saw a dazzling array of rose-shaded lights, and flowers, and silver, and glass, and pretty faces, massed in wonderful confusion. The babble of laughter and tongues was indescrib-

able; no doubt that "enjoyment" was the order of the day, or rather night, *here*.

Amidst it all one face shone out, beaming with happiness and mischief, one voice rang out more clearly than any other. The brilliant eyes were sparkling with pleasure, wit and mirth fired every laughing speech and jest that she showered around. Sir Jasper, fascinated yet bewildered, stood there and watched her, while over his shoulder appeared Miss Sabina's shocked and rigid face.

Then a sudden silence fell, a whispered hush-h stole round the glittering board.

Dr. MacShamus was proposing a health; his full sonorous voice and rounded periods rolled through the room. The brief speech touched all hearts. It spoke much that was felt by each, and that none but so old and tried a friend could have put into words.

"One whose popularity is as familiar as it is deserved—whose kind heart and generous nature no friend has ever taxed in vain, whom we all love and respect, and whose pleasant surprise of this evening is only another signal instance of what her wit and versatility are capable of—one whom we all pray may live for many a long year happy and prosperous as she deserves—one who, in the character of hostess to-night, has given us a more delightful entertainment than the famous Castle Lustrell has ever yet approached—this is the toast I propose, the health I ask you all to drink, with every honour and good wish that she deserves. Ladies and gentlemen, I propose the health of——"

"Peg, the Rake!"

Miss Em had sprung to her feet, in her hand a brimming goblet of champagne, and so standing she faced the stern horrified faces grouped in the doorway.

There was a second's astonished pause, then the voices round took up the name as if by one consent; the name their hostess had given them, in place of the empty title she abhorred.

Those who knew and those who did *not* know its origin alike seized upon it, and cheered her to the echo. And she—laughing defiance at the man who had deemed that name a humiliation—tossed off the sparkling wine in very mockery, and flaunted it before his eyes; cheered and honoured, and echoing the applause of half a hundred tongues, here in his own house, here at his own table, here by unanimous assent of his own guests!

CHAPTER XXXV

A FEMININE CAUSERIE

"FAITH," said Miss Bedelia, "it's the biggest mistake in the world to say women are ever too old for a bit of devilry—Irishwomen, I mean. If they are it's only because the right person isn't there to put them up to it!"

"I believe you're right," laughed Lady Pat. "Even I enjoyed the surprise party better than the orthodox one. As for you, Em, you seemed to have gone back to the old days once more."

"She has the true O'Hara temperament," said Miss Bedelia approvingly. Miss Em shrugged her shapely shoulders and moved slowly towards a

small table on which Quinlan had just placed a tray of glasses, a spirit stand, and some bottles of soda-water.

The three women had congregated in her dressing-room to discuss the ball and the people before going to bed. They had removed their finery for dressing-gowns and slippers, and disposed themselves in the deep cushioned arm-chairs that the mistress of the castle so dearly loved, and of which she had a supply in every room that she used.

"You'll not say—No?" she questioned, bringing a glass of the foaming mixture to each of the elder ladies.

"I'll answer for myself," said Miss Bedelia. "The fatigues of pleasure begin to tell on me now. Not that I'd be saying it to any one, or refusing any party for the sake of aching joints the day after. Ah, that's as good as champagne, and better any day," she said, putting down her empty glass. "'Twas very thoughtful of you, my dear, though I must say I had plenty of refreshment downstairs."

"And now," said Lady Pat, as Miss Em reseated herself, "tell me why you played that trick on Miss Lustrell, for I feel sure it was a trick. Sir Jasper and herself looked thunderstruck as they stood in the doorway."

Miss Em laughed. "Well, I'll confess to you both," she said. "I don't get on too well with Sabina, and her ideas of catering for so large an assembly were not quite so lavish as they might have been. But I didn't want to worry the creature unnecessarily, so I thought I'd have a supper party of my own. That's all."

"Then they didn't know about the second room at all?" questioned Lady Pat.

"No; Molly and I did everything, with the help of one maid."

"Shure, it was mighty creditable," laughed Miss Bedelia. "It reminds me of the tricks we'd play at home when we were youngsters, only we didn't carry out our jokes on such a large scale as you, Em. I'm thinking, all the same, people will talk about this."

"Let them," said Miss Em scornfully. "What do I care for their talking? I've had my way, and I've shown that I intend to have it——"

She paused abruptly. She had not aired her skeleton before other eyes yet, and she did not intend that Lady Pat should guess at its existence.

"Perhaps they wanted waking up a bit," remarked Miss Bedelia. "It's all very fine to be grand, but it's not amusing."

"Do you find many things amusing?" asked Lady Pat languidly. "I wish I could."

"Try shocking Mrs. Grundy," suggested Miss Bedelia.

"Oh, Lady Pat couldn't do that," said Miss Em; "she's on too good terms with the old lady, and she'd only be called *eccentric* when you and I would be pronounced disgraceful."

"Faith, it's not what we Irish do, but what we'd *dare* that frightens people," laughed Miss Bedelia. "Look at Charley Bray, now! trying to carry off his own wife in the light of day and against all the injunctions and penalties of the law, for you know she went in fear of her life of him, and had even got a separation."

"What was that?" asked Lady Pat, sipping soda-water and—something—abstractedly.

"Haven't you heard? Why, 'tis common talk now. He was a rare blackguard, and he'd only married her for her money and was making ducks and drakes of it, not to mention other little vagaries which no

decent woman could countenance. Well, when she got the separation he couldn't have the money any longer, and she was safe from him, living with her two brothers at Ballinatrach, and a good twenty miles between them. One day she was out in the carriage by herself, and just outside the village, Bray and two of his friends set on it and stopped the horses, and one of them threatened to brain the coachman if he stirred a hand, and Charley Bray himself opened the door and tried to drag the poor woman out, she all the time screeching and kicking like the—ahem. Well, you know, Emilia, my dear, what a powerful big woman she was. At last she gave him a kick that sent him flying across the road, and his friends ran to help him, and up she jumps on the coachman's box and takes the reins and drives off like fury till she reaches the lodge gates. Her husband hasn't troubled her since, I'm told."

"I'm not surprised at that," said Lady Pat, smiling.

"The family on her side always did give themselves mighty airs," said Miss Em. "You remember Lady Anne? Why, no one was good enough for her to speak to; and yet there were some pretty queer stories going round about her, and those trips to Paris and Algiers, and—Cairo, wasn't it?"

"A mighty safe place Cairo would be to go to if one was minded to have a diversion," said Miss Bedelia. "I commend it to your notice, Emilia, when you find the air of Castle Lustrell doesn't agree with you. Faith, 'twould be as good as Polynesia or Samoa, and more interesting, too, in the way of society."

"Lady Anne always had her husband's permission to winter at Cairo," interpolated Lady Pat. "You mustn't be uncharitable, Em."

"I'm not," answered Miss Em; "only I happen to know how very agreeably *he* managed to pass those winters when his wife's lungs were delicate."

"Indeed, 'tis a wicked world," said Miss Bedelia with sudden gravity, "and society's getting worse every day. It smiles at hypocrites when it should stamp sinners. It kisses us in public, and shudders at us in private. It affects to believe what we *say* we are, and questions our morals no more than it does our religion. Both are too sacred for intrusion."

"I've had a wide experience," said Lady Pat presently. "I sometimes ask myself if I oughtn't to regret instead of boast of it. Dear, dear, it is sad to grow old, and look back on a volume of histories, and remember how few among them are creditable, or wise, or happy."

"The happy have no histories," quoted Miss Em; "for them life is only a stagnant pool, a dead level, a valley from which they never lift their eyes to gaze at mountain heights or hill tops beyond their reach."

"If that's so I'm glad I was never happy," laughed Miss Bedelia. "Many's the hill top I've climbed, and many's the slip and tumble I've had on my way. All the same, I'm glad to have tried to breathe a higher atmosphere, though my success wasn't much to boast of."

"You've always taken life easily," said Lady Pat, regarding her thoughtfully. "I suppose you've never regretted that—that——"

"Don't fear to give it a name," said Miss Bedelia; "that I didn't exchange my liberty, you mean? Well, it's a difficult question to answer truthfully. There have been times when I was sorry that I'd denied myself the love of husband or child. All women must feel that some time or other. Sure, isn't it Nature that speaks to us?"

"We are three childless women," said Lady Pat with sudden gravity, "and we have said we know *life*. Why, a woman may have all the gifts of fortune, all the triumphs of beauty, a lover's worship, a husband's love, but believe me, if she has not felt a little child's lips touch her own unasked—her *own* little child—she has missed something life can never atone for."

A little shiver ran through Miss Em's quiet frame, but her face seemed to grow suddenly hard and cold.

"That is only sentiment," she said. "Children are but another form of heart-break. Every new tie in life is only a new burden; fresh worry, anxiety, expense. I fail to see where the compensation comes in."

"That's what many a woman says before she becomes a mother," remarked Miss Bedelia. "I suppose, as with most things, the theory is different to the practice. I've known some very bad mothers whom the world called good *women*, and on the other hand some very bad women who were good mothers. But indeed we're weak creatures at the best, and men have much to answer for."

"Don't say *men*," said Lady Pat languidly; "that limits our horizon so painfully; we ought to have some wider sphere than their praise or countenance has given us."

Miss Em's eyes flashed with sudden scorn. "There would be no sphere too wide for us if we once got our chance! The world would be a different place to-day if women hadn't contented themselves with being what men had decreed them to be. A patent with no need of improvement! that's the Eternal Feminine, according to them."

"But, according to us," said Lady Pat, "the Eternal Feminine will prove a dangerous personage before many years are over. That rib is growing to alarming proportions."

"Well, it may stop where it is for me," laughed Miss Bedelia. "I've had my day and a very good day it was too. What would we be turning the world topsy-turvy for? Faith, 'tis a bad place enough, but who's to right it? Priests haven't done it, kings haven't done it, sorrow and suffering, wars and governments haven't done it; and maybe you'll say I'm behind the times if I give you my opinion that *women* won't do it, though I'd not prevent them having a try at it. They're queer creatures at best, swayed one way and another, carried off their feet by impulse; wicked without vice, and pure without virtue; the queerest contradictions into which God ever put the breath of life."

"I used to be very hard on women's follies and women's sins—once," said Lady Pat thoughtfully; "but I am older now—I won't say wiser—and I confess frankly that if life has taught me nothing else it has taught me charity in judgment. I could excuse anything, everything, every sin they commit, every temptation to which they yield, so cruel is life to them!"

"It is cruel," cried Miss Em suddenly. "Never more so than when it takes our youth and leaves us only 'footprints of memory on the sands of time.'"

"The curse of modern life is self-analysis," said Lady Pat; "don't let us turn Hamlets at this time of night, or rather, morning. Better to discuss our neighbours' faults than to dissect our own natures. It is a waste of time, thought, and emotion."

"It's a necessity to which we are driven despite ourselves," said Miss

Em moodily. "Our sphere is limited to that, when we seek interest in anything beyond the dismal routine of existence."

"Limitations," observed Lady Pat, "are the fate of life. They prove the impossibility of doing what you *want* to do with it."

"I fancy if we could do what we want to do, some of us would be landed in very queer places," said Miss Bedelia. "There's things I've heard women say they wanted to do would astonish you, Lady Pat, with all your acquaintance with society. You never heard, I'm sure, of that pretty little Mrs. Vaughan-Smith; looks like a piece of Dresden china, so fragile and dainty and innocent. Well, nothing would content her but dressing up in her brother's clothes (they were twins, and like as two peas, height and all), and going out at night in the Dublin streets; and if she didn't meet one of his friends, and he took her to a music-hall, and a fine time she had of it, and no one would ever have been the wiser only she let out what the man said of another married woman. That led to ructions, and in a fit of recklessness she told the whole story. But her husband was a good soul and he forgave her, and she snapped her fingers at other folk, and after a few days' talk, faith, 'twas the man had the laugh against *him*, and she not a penny the worse."

"Didn't I say 'tis a case of 'what a woman would *do*, what an Irishwoman would *dare*'?" said Lady Pat, laughing. "I happen to know the Dresden china doll you mention. If ever innocence was belied, her mind gives the lie to her face. But every one believes in her, and *she* has never had to go to Cairo."

"Ah, now that's very uncharitable," said Miss Bedelia. "You're as bad as Mrs. Lyons' nurse, who tells the story of attending her whole family through the scarlet fever, and the morning she went away Mrs. Lyons vowed she must send her a handsome present, and then—borrowed half a crown. I needn't tell you she never got sight of the present, and indeed had to summons her for her nursing fee afterwards."

"Was that the Mrs. Harry Lyons who came in for so much money a year ago?" asked Miss Em.

"The same. Did you ever hear of that grand dinner they gave—their first? The husband was just a common man, and she wasn't much better; but the airs now, faith—they'd make the dead and gone Lyons stare!"

"What about the dinner-party?" asked Lady Pat.

"Oh! a queer set-out that was," laughed Miss Bedelia, "and not the most select of company, the men especially—indeed, 'twas the first time some of them had ever put on dress clothes. She herself was just as nervous as a hen on a hot griddle, and keeping an eye all the time on their behaviour, for she'd been studying the 'Etiquette of the Dinner-table' ever since she'd the party in her mind. But I suppose she wasn't sure they knew as much as she did, for when it came to the time for the ladies retiring she jumps up and says: "Gintlemen, you'll all please to stand while the ladies lave the room."

Lady Pat laughed heartily.

"I can quite believe that of her," she said.

"And now she's got the best set in Dublin round her," added Miss Bedelia.

"What a pity wealth and vulgarity so often go together!" continued Lady Pat. "But here we are scandalising our neighbours at three o'clock in the morning, instead of going to bed like sensible folk."

She rose, yawning slightly, but Miss Bedelia shook herself jauntily, and declared her intention of sitting up an hour longer, as she hadn't had an opportunity of talking to her niece alone since she married. Lady Pat kissed them both and left the room.

"Now, my dear," said Miss Bedelia when the door closed, "if you could get such a thing as a kettle of hot water and let me make myself a drop of punch, it would just settle all that champagne, not to mention the ices and creams I partook of. It was a fine supper, and no mistake. Ah, I see you've got a spirit-lamp and kettle; I call that quite a neat invention now. You never know whether you mightn't be taken with cramp in the stomach, or some such ailment in the night, and you're not such a young woman now, Peg, my darling, though you wear your years well, that I will say, and you looked magnificent to-night. Now, come and tell me all about it," she added coaxingly, and drawing Miss Em's chair close to her own, "wouldn't they let you have your own way about the party at all?"

"Not without a battle," said Miss Em somewhat wearily, "and I didn't feel inclined for that, so I tried strategy."

"But what's the reason?" asked Miss Bedelia. "Don't you and Sir Jasper agree? as for that sour old maid, I can't for the life of me understand why you have her here at the castle at all. You're well and strong now, and it's but right you should be your own mistress."

Miss Em bent over the little silver kettle which was bubbling and hissing promisingly, and evaded a direct answer.

"It's very dull being grand," went on Miss Bedelia. "Somehow all respectability is that, but of course we owe it to our station. I never could stand it for long though. I like amusing society, and I'm not too particular as to who or what people are if they please me. And that's what puzzles me, Peg, with you; faith, I'd have Miss Lustrell out of the house before another sun sets if she gave me any of her airs!"

"You don't understand my position," said Miss Em, carefully measuring and mixing the punch as only an Irish person can. "It suits me not to quarrel with Sir Jasper, and therefore I must allow his sister to remain here. It also suits me not to be overruled by her, and so I circumvent her plots by counter-plots. That is the state of affairs between us."

"Ah, well, marriage is a lottery," said Miss Bedelia, sipping the cordial gratefully. "Faith, darling, the longer I live the better pleased I am I never gave up my liberty. It's a grand thing to be able to do what you like, and never need to say 'By your leave' to man or woman."

She crossed her feet, and leant back and indulged in another sip of the mellow draught. "Why don't you mix yourself a glass?" she said presently, looking at her niece's tired white face as it rested against the crimson cushions; "'twill do you good; you look fatigued, my dear."

Miss Em shook her head.

"No," she said; "'tis a dangerous comforter, and my head isn't what it was."

"Im sorry for that," said Miss Bedelia sympathisingly. "But I'd be the last person to advise stimulants to any one against their own knowledge of themselves. Did you hear of Mrs. Murray—not married a year—Peggy Harrison that was, you know? Such a pretty girl, lovely indeed, all the men raved about her when she was presented. Well, her husband, poor man, is just driven wild with her. She's never sober a day, they say, and he can't keep the drink away from her. She pawned her

very rings to get it when he wouldn't let her have the keys of the cellar. She'll kill herself, all the doctors say."

Miss Em shuddered. "They made her marry him," she said presently; "you know she was madly in love with that young officer Jimmy Fortescue, but he hadn't a penny. This is the result, I suppose."

"'Twas done for the best. Trying to hammer out the old nail with a new one, you know. Maybe the old one was driven in too far. Anyway they're going to leave Dublin and go to America or Australia, or some foreign place. That's the last chance."

"It's very sad," said Miss Em thoughtfully. "If they had let her have her own way she might have been a better woman. There are worse things to face than poverty."

"Perhaps so, but poverty's a mighty uncomfortable thing for all that," said Miss Bedelia, glancing round at the luxurious chamber. "I'm glad your lines have fallen in pleasant places, my darling, at all events; and even if Sir Jasper's a bit trying, and Miss Sabina an old harridan, they can't live for ever, and you're bound to be rich and free some day."

"Bound?" echoed Miss Em drearily. "Don't they say it is always the unexpected that happens? I might die before either of them, and then, what have I gained in exchange for——"

"For what?" questioned Miss Bedelia sharply.

"For my soul, I often think," came the reckless answer.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THREADS OF THE NET

Miss EM had so fully expected a storm after her last escapade that she was almost disappointed at hearing no remark from Sir Jasper on the subject. But when their visitors had left the castle and life had resumed its routine, she began to note a subtle curious change in the way she was treated. It might be described as the humouring of a sick person's fancies, the yielding, under protest, to the whims of some one not quite responsible for those whims. At first she was amused at this, and even laughed it over with Molly; but soon it began to irritate her highly strung nerves, and when it took the form of a certain covert watchfulness on the part of Miss Sabina and the servants, she grew highly indignant, and demanded an explanation.

Soothing words and a patronising pretence of consideration were the only result. They planted the first germs of a suspicion in Miss EM's quick brain, but fortunately for herself that suspicion was treated at first as a jest. It seemed too absurd that they should really believe her head was—well, not quite right; that even slight contradictions must now be avoided. The forced manner in which her wishes were consulted, even when plainly disobeyed, irritated her even more than all previous ignoring of her authority.

It was Sir Jasper's revenge she knew, but the knowledge was decidedly unpleasant. Besides, it was carrying the jest too far when the same obtrusive deference was displayed before visitors, or at any entertainment to which they had accepted an invitation.

Slowly but surely the whisper spread, and unkind tongues were not loth to give it utterance. Poor Lady Lustrell was a little "queer in her

head"; not absolutely insane, of course, but *odd*, and requiring much vigilance and care.

A few staunch friends refused to believe it, and the MacShamuses did their best to give the rumour stout denial. But it is easier to assert a lie than to disprove one; and the rolling stone of slander managed to gather a good deal of moss in the way of hints, stories, and suggestions, as it made its way through the county.

The Emerald Isle is not behind the rest of the world in its judgments or its uncharitableness. Indeed, why should it be, considering that no people take a deeper interest in their fellows, whatever be their station, rank, or calling, than those warm-hearted, erratic, and most insincere Celts? Gossip is the breath of life to every village and hamlet. It is the salt of existence to those higher classes, "the quality"; no one is too mean, or too insignificant, or too evil to escape discussion; and if the smallest *souppçon* of mystery is dropped into the dish of scandal, that dish becomes doubly delectable, and no one dreams of passing it on untasted.

There had always been something "odd" about Miss Em; every one agreed on that now, and the wild strain in the O'Hara blood was again recalled to the memory of the present generation by their elders, who claimed contemporary knowledge with past members of that ill-omened family.

Lady Lustrell's extraordinary conduct at her own supper-table was related again and again. The wild outburst in which she had claimed once more the old title of "Peg, the Rake," was commented on in a way that would have made its originator shudder. So strangely do we earn our judgments by our deeds!

People still called on her, and still invited her; but that strange frost, that subtle change of manner spreading through every circle into which she intruded, were keenly and cruelly apparent, and touched her sensitive nature sometimes to pain, and sometimes to a wild, helpless rage that was almost terrifying.

Molly tried to assure her that her suspicions were unfounded, and by her bright and happy companionship did much to disperse the clouds that at times gathered so ominously. But there were dark hours at hand when Molly could not be present, hours in which Miss Em could not evade the threatening shadow on the threshold, hours when her own company grew hateful, and yet she feared to seek other.

Probably the thumb-screw of the Inquisition did not look a very terrible instrument of torture; but only the martyr who felt its slow increasing pressure knew what agony it caused, and the thumb-screw of an unseen tyranny was being steadily applied to Miss Em's inner life.

If she could have seized, raged at it, battled with it, there would have been some satisfaction to be gained. But this was impossible. Her own pride would not let her acknowledge that her fears had tangible foundation. She was for ever on the defence, but the foe never approached near enough for absolute conflict.

It was a situation infinitely more trying to nerves and temper than one of more positive aggravation. To all appearance Sir Jasper and herself agreed perfectly, and he was in the worst position of the two, but in her own heart she recognised with growing horror that indifference and dislike were developing into hatred, hatred of the cold sneer, the veiled discourtesy, the hidden tyranny, the hundred and one petty meannesses which met her perpetually.

She went out into society still; she laughed, talked, jested in the old light-hearted fashion; but the zest was gone from it all, and her heart ached as it had never ached since her girlhood's wild glad days.

She had nothing to fall back upon; no occupation, no dilettante tampering with art, no domestic interests, nothing but Molly's companionship; and Molly was often kept away or sent on visits, so that they might be parted.

All through the warm bright days of summer she suffered and endured, while inwardly raging at her bonds.

She felt old at last. Too old for such vengeance as once she might have taken, too old to win the world's favour or forgiveness once she had lost her hold on it—the hold that her position as Sir Jasper's wife still gave her.

Sometimes a cold fear touched her. "If he tempted me to an outbreak," she thought. "If he *tried* to prove me mad, what should I do? There's no one now to whom I could appeal."

And, indeed, she was right. Her father was dead; her stepmother hated her; Miss Bedelia would have no right to interfere.

The thought and the fear grew side by side—twin shapes of dread that rarely left her, and the very brooding over them was a danger which she dimly recognised, but a danger that there was no kind strong voice to warn her of.

If she could have spoken of it to Dr. MacShamus he would have combated the growing horror with his cheery counsel, or laughed at it as a childish bugbear; but of late she had shunned these old friends with an odd shrinking from their pity, and fenced her life with a barrier of reserve that defied the kindest effort at intrusion.

As time went on, her gradual shrinking from society became evident, and in marked contrast to that withdrawal was the growing popularity of the new master of Rooklands. The county seemed to have forgiven Denis Morrison the sins of his youth, and to be gradually, but surely, welcoming him back. His vast wealth was in itself a power that could not but prove a powerful lever in his favour. His lavish generosity, his reckless extravagance, the style in which he lived and entertained, were all subjects of importance.

People began to talk of him incessantly; to wonder whom he would marry; how he had made his enormous fortune; his reasons for buying the adjoining estate, which estate spread almost to the borders of Castle Lustrell, and made a far finer property? And all this filtered by degrees to Miss Em's ears, with additional gossip as to the lady favoured by his attentions, who varied according to the invention or liking of the informant.

Minnie Barrington was the latest candidate for the honour, according to Quinlan, who had come to the castle one hot afternoon to "have a peep" at her darlin', as she announced it.

She was distressed beyond measure to find her looking so pale and listless, and unlike herself.

"Shure, me darlin', 'tis a change yer wantin'," said the old woman in deep concern. "Why don't ye go to the sayside for a few weeks? 'Twud do ye a power o' good."

Miss Em shook her head.

"Sir Jasper hates leaving the castle," she said, "and the air here is

good enough, Quinny dear. I'm all right; don't look so anxious," and she kissed the old woman's withered cheek with sudden passionate tenderness.

But those faithful eyes were not to be deceived. This pale haggard creature, with anxious lines on her brow and heavy shadows under her eyes, was very unlike the brilliant handsome woman who had been the life and soul of the castle ball a few months previously. She looked ten years older in this brief time. Her spasmodic fits of gaiety were more painful to her nurse's watchful eyes than previous depression. She could have recognised the fateful Irish temperament in the one, for she knew well how volatile and changeable it is, but she could not bear to see *effort* where once all had been spontaneous; she could not bear to think her beloved Miss Peg should deem it unnecessary to be unreal with her, as undoubtedly she was.

That interview was painful to both, and sorely perplexing to Quinlan, who vainly tried to discover the reason for a change so strenuously denied.

Was she unhappy? No. Did Sir Jasper vex her or trouble her? No. Was it Miss Sabina then, bad luck to her, who had brought this change upon her? Still no, no, no.

"There's nothing the matter indeed, Quinny," reiterated Miss Em; "except that I'm growing old, and life is no longer a jest to me."

"Old is it?" ejaculated Quinlan scornfully, "an' yer eyes as bright, an' yer figure as straight as a gurril's! Ah now, don't be after talkin' that sort o' nonsense to me, my darlin'. It's not ould ye'll iver be; an' while the heart's young and fresh 'tis small matter that the hair is white."

She stayed on chatting encouragingly and indifferently in her old random fashion, and after a while went down to have her tea in the servants' hall. She was determined to keep her eyes open for any hint that might explain this strange change in the mistress of the castle. But when that hint came through a chance phrase from the old housekeeper that "Lady Lustrell, poor soul, had never been quite right in her mind since her illness," the faithful creature's indignation was boundless. That they should dare say such a thing of her adored "Miss Peg" called forth an amount of vituperation only possible to an Irish tongue.

The war raged violently. Hints became assertions, and statements became proofs; soon enough Quinlan saw what was at work, the origin of this cruel change, and the more dreadful possibilities it unfolded.

With quick tact she curbed her anger, and affected to treat the whole thing as a jest. Peace once more reigned, and the ready wit and jokes with which she turned off the subject into other channels created a diversion of opinion in the minds of those she left behind her.

Who should know their mistress better than her old nurse did, and how she had laughed at them! If eccentricity meant incipient madness then surely no Irish family was free from the taint. Quinlan had related incidents before which Lady Lustrell's deeds paled into insignificance! Still, mud is apt to stick when once thrown, and the impression created by Quinlan's staunch disbelief was not a lasting one.

Unconsciously Miss Em did much to further it. A sudden shrinking from society, a nervous manner on entering a room or seeing any one else suddenly enter it, gave rise to fresh comments. The real reason was known only to herself.

She dreaded to meet Denis Morrison face to face, and she knew that she constantly ran this risk.

She had promised Sir Jasper that she would never speak to him, but as his popularity increased she felt this would be a difficult promise to keep. Once or twice they had narrowly escaped a meeting, and often she had caught sight of him riding or walking, and avoided an encounter. But she thought of him perpetually as her life narrowed itself into more personal channels; as long hours of loneliness and dreariness shadowed her daily existence, and the deadly fangs of *ennui* fastened on her mental energies and held them cramped and tortured in its grip.

The failure of this energy, and the absolute indifference she felt to matters that had once been of interest and importance, were sometimes distressful to herself; she could not understand them. She knew she was watched by critical and exacting eyes; the eyes of the man she had married, and of the man who knew her secret as no other save herself knew it. There had been a time when to play a part to each of these would have been only a delightful stimulant, a something that would have braced every energy and called up every feminine art, but now—it seemed only weariness.

As Lady Lustrell there were demands upon her she felt compelled to answer, exactions on the part of her husband that she was bound to meet. If he discerned any opposing will in her he had also acquired a power of coercion that reduced such opposition to mere foolishness, that set before her a part and forced her to play it, whatever rebellion might be going on within her soul.

Only a woman knows the force of a thousand and one minute threads, so to speak, weaving a web of obligation around each action of her daily life, fragile, intangible at first, but growing stronger and more complicated with every hour that knows them unbroken.

Who would believe, seeing the first feeble loops of the hunter's net, that they could be multiplied into a trap strong enough to enfold the king of beasts? Yet so it is; and so is many another net that Fate weaves for human lives; so fragile at first a child's fingers might break it, so strong at last a man's whole will may not force its meshes or defy its soft entanglement.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"MY SPINNING IS ALL DONE"

THERE were times when Lady Patricia Moira wondered whether that matrimonial scheme on which she had been so bent, had not proved a ghastly failure; whether it had been quite wise, after all, to persuade and argue, and influence her godchild's mind as she had done.

The result seemed to point to the contrary.

A wall of reserve was creeping up between Miss Em and herself. Those visits to Castle Lustrell which she had confidently anticipated in her part of the scheme, had never taken the shape of an invitation yet. The ball indeed was an exception, but even then she had only been asked for two days; and Miss Bedelia and herself had come to the conclusion that something was decidedly wrong in the household, though neither could define the "something" very exactly.

Lady Lustrell was *not* a free agent. So much, at least, was apparent. The usual position of a comparatively young wife towards an old husband

was not the position she held. Sir Jasper was neither uxorious nor devoted; his manner was politely cold, but politely suggestive of a "steel hand beneath the velvet glove"; and neither Lady Pat nor her friend could quite fit in the "steel hand" theory with their own preconceived ideas of husband and wife.

When they were on their way back to Dublin they discussed the point keenly, but came to the inevitable conclusion that by whatever means it had been done, Miss Em was mastered at last.

She had tried to throw dust in their eyes to no purpose. Their experience of her had been long enough to convince them that only some very strong power could ever coerce her into submission. It had not occurred to either that Sir Jasper could be the person to possess this power; and yet, in the mind of each, there lurked something stronger than suspicion that he did.

He had not displayed himself in a very favourable light as a host, and their acute eyes detected much that he had fancied successfully concealed. They felt alarmed for their favourite, though not for worlds would they have confessed it. The old random nature which had led to that scene in the supper-room had been quite recognisable, as also the invitation to assemble in her dressing-room in the small hours of the morning, and discuss persons, circumstances, and things with such accompaniments as Quinlan had judiciously supplied. Hot punch and whisky and soda were no mean inducements to gossip or confidence, and many a party had been concluded in a similar fashion; but this occasion had wanted something of the old mirth, the old interest, the old reckless jests and quips which had been wont to make Miss Em's company exhilarating.

And instinctively they felt it was the last of such meetings.

Their tepid host had given no invitation to repeat the visit, and expressed no regret at its termination. The chill of a long parting fell on each as they kissed Miss Em's cold lips, and heard the strained unnatural tones of her voice.

But the *raison d'être* puzzled them.

As time wore on they grew more uneasy respecting her. Her letters, once so numerous and so full of fun and gossip, grew fewer and fewer, and their contents lacked interest or invention. She never hinted at any desire to see them, and told them scarcely anything of her own immediate life.

"She was well, she had gone to a dinner-party, or given one." "Miss Lustrell had done a little more cheese-paring in the way of household economy." "Molly was away on a visit."—These were the scanty items of news that came at rare intervals. Scarcely a word of *herself*; her feelings, thoughts, actions, that bright magnetic mischievous anomaly which had moved in their immediate circle, and was so sorely missed.

At times Lady Pat grew seriously uneasy. She would have gladly risked the discomfort of a visit to the castle, despite Sir Jasper's coolness, had its mistress hinted at a desire for such a thing; but this she never did.

They could but dimly guess at unhappiness, and yet shrink from uttering sympathy which was unasked—and to all appearance undesired.

One thing Lady Lustrell felt keenly in the new position of affairs was the want of money. The humiliation of refusal had once been her experience, and then she determined never to ask again. If it had been possible to win any by her old luck at the card-table, she would not

have hesitated at trying it; but Sir Jasper had a horror of women gambling, or said so, and sternly forbade his wife even the innocent pastime of sixpenny whist. A swift flood of rebellion was let loose by reason of this mandate, and indeed Miss Em would have disobeyed it openly had she had the chance; but that was denied her. The runs over to the doctor's house, the hastily got up rubber, the ever welcome "nap," things possible to the vagrant "Miss Em," were not possible to Lady Lustrell.

For her must be the carriage drive, the state call, the ceremonious announcement. Frolic and fun were things of the past, never again to be indulged in. On every side her helplessness hedged her in, and she shrank alike from any appeal or any passionate outbreak, for fear that worse might happen.

The time when she would have acted without counting the cost was gone by. She felt, however little she had gained, that she had still a great deal to lose. And she had resolved that Mrs. O'Hara should never have the satisfaction of feeling she had spoilt her life for her at the very crowning point of its success.

So she endured, though inwardly rebelling; endured as women do and must, once they have fettered themselves with obligations; but under her silence and passivity a dangerous hatred and vindictiveness lurked, like mastiffs kept in leash by a strong hand, but certain to break loose some day and spring at the throat of their tormentor.

* * * * *

August had taken its departure. September, her sweet and genial sister, was breathing fresh and wholesome airs over the garnered harvest fields, ruffling the golden stubble and scarlet poppies, giving here and there a gentle hint of change in store.

The trees in Lustrell Park were gorgeous in their colouring. The flushed leaves had a tremulous delight in their own beauty. Hips and haws glowed ruddily in the hedges; the nuts were hard and brown, and only the clustering ivy berries mourned in duller colouring amongst tears of dew that nightly fell through clustering leaves.

The whirr of wings and crack of guns were now daily sounds. Brilliant-hued pheasants fled scared into sheltering coverts, recognising the fate of their small brown sisterhood as a judgment about to fall on themselves.

Lady Lustrell stood at her boudoir window one evening, watching the red glow in the west with that dreary indifference now becoming habitual.

"It is hateful to be alone," she thought, as her eyes caught sight of two figures—only a farm labourer and a "colleen"—skirting a distant field path, a right-of-way leading to the village. The girl's scarlet petticoat made a bright spot of colour against the russet hedge; her lithe form was instinct with natural grace. The man's arm was wound about her waist in loving proprietorship, and her dusky head leant against his shoulder.

Those tired grey eyes watched the scene with a sadness more mournful than tears.

"I too might have been loved," so her heart whispered; "I too might have known the strong protecting care—the manly help—the cheery comradeship that means so much! Oh fool! fool! fool! For what have I bartered all that makes or means life?"

One of those tempests of rage that in years gone by had meant a revolt against all social decorum shook her from head to foot. She paced her

room like a caged lioness, twisting her interlaced hands until the joints ached; her bosom rent and racked with stormy sighs that found no relief in tears.

Suddenly came a soft tapping at the door. She straightened herself, and the dropped mask was replaced in an instant, even as she crossed the room and turned the key.

There came one glad cry, almost fierce in its intensity of relief and surprise: "Molly! You! Oh, my darling, my darling!"

Tears rained from her eyes on the girl's soft cheek as she kissed her wildly, hungrily—as one kisses the one dear thing one loves in a world of emptiness. The passion and joy of her welcome startled and half frightened the girl, accustomed as she was by now to these fits of passionate devotion.

"You poor dear, how glad you always are to have me back!" she said tenderly. "Has it been very lonely for you this time?"

"Lonely! it has been hateful, horrible—a living death! There, there, Molly, don't let us talk of it. You have come home; I shall be happy again. What a surprise though!—you did not write?"

"I wrote to Aunt Sabina. Didn't she tell you?"

"No," said Miss Em with sudden gloom; "she never does tell me anything now."

"Ah, well, we won't mind her," said Molly brightly. "You mope too much when I leave you, that's the truth. I've come back in time for the Barringtons' ball; Papa and Aunt Sabina won't go, so we'll have a fine time of it."

"But I've refused!" exclaimed Miss Em.

"Well, I accepted, and I can't go alone. They sent my invitation on to me at Bray. Oh, nonsense, you'll have to come; it would do you a world of good. Why, you've been nowhere for months! it's quite ridiculous."

"I can't be for ever wearing that green velvet. It's as well known as—as your aunt's black satin," laughed Miss Em, her spirits rising at the girl's cheery voice.

"Oh! we'll concoct something," said Molly, laughing also. "I'll tell you a secret—Mrs. Creagh when I was leaving had to go into mourning suddenly, and as she's had no end of gorgeous gowns for Bray, she insisted on giving me a couple. One is a peach-coloured brocade, the very thing for you; with the green velvet train, and the front draped with lace, you'll look lovely, and every one will think it's a new gown. I'm going to wear the loveliest white satin, made up like that old picture of Dame Lustrell—you know; hanging quite straight and with a broad sash under the arms, and my hair twisted high on the top of my head. What do you think of that idea?"

"Lovely!" exclaimed Miss Em, warming to the old foolish subject as if the girl's enthusiasm had recalled her own. "But you couldn't help looking lovely, my darling," she added fondly; "it matters little what you wear."

"Oh, indeed it matters a very great deal," said the girl merrily, "much more than you think. By the way," she added abruptly, "is it *really* true that Minnie Barrington is engaged at last? A great match too, I heard; but as you're on the spot you ought to know."

"I—I've heard it spoken of," said Miss Em, turning away quickly. "How dark it has grown, dear! Shall I ring for lights, and will you have tea up here? Your father and Miss Lustrell are dining out to-night."

"How delightful!" exclaimed Molly. "I don't want any dinner. Let's

have some chicken or something up here with our tea, and we'll have a real long cosy talk over everything and everybody."

Miss Em rang the bell, and gave the necessary orders to her maid, who conveyed it to the kitchen dignitaries; and they, scenting an evening of liberty and freedom from *espionage*, readily obeyed the instructions.

The result was that a charming little repast was served in Lady Lustrell's boudoir, with an absence of formality and detail, that specialised one suitability of tea-gowns and awoke in Miss Em herself much of the old merriment and zest that the frost of Molly's absence had killed.

Miss Sabina and Sir Jasper went to their dinner-party. He captious and grumbling at the obligation; she sour and stiff as her wont, and both secretly bitter at Miss Em for absenting herself on the plea of severe headache, which plea had been conveyed to them some half-hour before Molly's arrival, else they would have suspected another cause for the excuse.

Meanwhile, the two left to their own sweet wills enjoyed themselves immensely. They gossiped of all the events, circumstances, and possibilities affecting their immediate surroundings; of Molly's conquests at Bray; of Paddy Kearney's jealousy and impatience which were rapidly threatening to break all bounds, and kept the girl in a state of terror.

"Papa will never consent, I'm sure of that," she reiterated; "and what's the use of running away and getting married, when Paddy, dear old boy, has more debts than his income can cover? I'm not worldly minded, goodness knows; but I know one can't live without a house, and clothes, and servants, and Paddy is in an expensive regiment, and wouldn't like his wife to be shabby, or put up in lodgings."

"I wonder how it is," said Miss Em thoughtfully, "that people who have wealth always make such a bad use of it, and those who would be glad to do good, or be generous, never get the chance? Oh, my dear, my dear, if I were only rich and—*independent*, what I might make of life, even now!"

Her eyes flashed. She threw out her arms with a sudden gesture, as if the freedom she craved were within her grasp. Then as suddenly she let them fall, and the old miserable cloud of dissatisfaction fell upon her.

"To have followed that will-o'-the-wisp so long," she muttered to herself, forgetful even of the girl's presence in her fierce regrets, "and to land in this quagmire of misery after all!"

"But are you so very unhappy?" asked Molly softly. "I often wondered what made you marry papa, but I thought you were getting on better now. He is trying, I know, and as for Aunt Sabina——"

Miss Em laughed somewhat harshly. "Don't let us talk about them," she said; "even captives cheat themselves into forgetfulness of their chains sometimes. I think my life has all gone wrong, like that of the lady in Mrs. Browning's poem whose 'spinning was all done'; do you remember?"

"I remember," said the girl softly, as she kissed the trembling lips, "one line; it is—'This sinner was a loving one.'"

"Ah! dear heart," cried Miss Em, drawing the bright young head close to her. "There are many sinners of whom *that* might be said; but it wins no mercy from men who have ruined, or women who have scorned them."

"Is the world so merciless?"

"Utterly, utterly; I speak of what I know, Molly—what I have seen, felt, experienced; for now life to me means only '*my spinning is all done.*'"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"AND WRONG DID TEACH THIS JESTING BOLD"

"It is like old times!" said Miss Em, surveying breadths of peach-coloured brocade which were being draped and arranged by Molly and the useful maid, upon her patient figure.

There was no time to call in professional assistance. The dress must be ready by to-night, and three pairs of hands worked actively to get it done through the bright morning hours. Miss Em was going through a martyrdom of pins and "tackings," and fixing and unfixing, so as to produce a totally new effect from the combination of old and new materials.

The result was more than creditable to all concerned. The lovely emerald hue of the rich velvet set off the delicate tints of the brocade, which fell in graceful folds from throat to feet leaving the beautiful arms bare.

"I always hope I shall wear as well as you," said Molly admiringly. "But do you know, dear, you have got very thin lately?"

"Yes, that is why I am eschewing low necks," said Miss Em. "A woman has no right to inflict her anatomy on the public gaze; a scraggy neck or a too plump one calls alike upon one's sense of delicacy. Fashion is often idiotic, but it needn't be arbitrary, if one has any sense of proportion or becomingness."

"There, we have done with you now," said Molly, releasing her from her strained attitude, and deftly removing the gown. "I prophesy this will be a success, and every one will think it is an entirely new confection."

Miss Em smiled as she assumed her ordinary attire. "I was afraid your father would object to our going at all," she said presently.

"Oh, he did at first," said Molly, "but I talked him over. I said the girls had been most pressing, and I had accepted, and of course I couldn't go alone. But we're not to stay a moment after twelve, and he and Aunt Sabina are going to sit up for us to make sure we *are* home by the half-hour. How foolish to give a dance on a Saturday night, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Miss Em somewhat abstractedly, as she threaded her needle; "but if you get there by half-past nine you will have plenty of time for dancing."

"And two hours' chaperonage is enough infliction for you," said Molly brightly; "not that you need be a wallflower at all, unless you choose."

An odd smile swept over Miss Em's face. She wondered if Molly would notice how often now she was left alone, or relegated to the fossilised attentions of some ancient member of county society; if the girl's quick eye would detect what to her excited fancy seemed slights veiled only by polite indifference, the reason of which she had failed to discover. To-night would be a test-point. The Barringtons were in a good set, and if the occasion was what gossip had declared it to be, almost every one of any note or importance would be at the dance.

Her brain was on fire with curiosity to discover the truth of this rumour. Was Denis Morrison caught at last, and by such a shallow, ill-natured piece of femininity as Minnie Barrington? She felt thankful that the gossip had not filtered to Sir Jasper's ear through any chance channel; thankful that he would not be present if she and this man had to meet at last. Meet and greet each other with a grave of buried

memories between; meet in bitterness and pain no longer, having learnt life's great lesson at last—to endure in silence, to bear with patience, to forgive—with charity.

She had learnt it in this hateful year of discipline and bondage; learnt it when the hot fires of youth had burnt themselves out of her heart at last, leaving behind only grey ashes of hopelessness.

The day sped on, the industrious feminine fingers did their work successfully and with unceasing patience.

Outside the red sun glowed warmly over wood and stubble field and covert sides. The noise of birds was shrill and sweet in the ivy round the open windows of Miss Em's rooms. The crack of sportsmen's guns rang from time to time with sharp detonation on the quiet air.

"They are shooting the new coverts, I suppose," said Molly once. "I've heard Mr. Morrison is a splendid shot. He has a fine property now, hasn't he, with all those acres added to Rooklands? I suppose he'll build a new house there when he is married."

"Why should he?" asked Miss Em quickly. "Rooklands is a beautiful old place, and large enough for half a dozen families, I should say."

"You know it then?" asked Molly, glancing up from her work. "I never heard you say you had been there."

"It was many years ago," said Miss Em indifferently, "when the old man was alive."

"Wasn't he very wicked, or something?" asked the girl curiously.

"Not more wicked than many men who manage to get baptised in the Jordan of respectability after committing every sin they feel inclined for," answered Miss Em bitterly. "Society has an odd way of classifying sins and sinners. A reformed rake is generally the most circumspect of mortals, and he visits relentlessly on others those very offences which once were so dear to his own heart."

"Then old Morrison was that sort of man?" queried Molly, with the curiosity of innocence that is no longer ignorant, but pitiful and full of wonder at what is dimly felt to be "unclean."

"He was—that sort of man," said Miss Em. "But we will not discuss him, if you please, Molly; it is not a subject I care to talk about."

* * * * *

To be late for dinner was no unusual proceeding on the part of Lady Lustrell, and Sir Jasper was just beginning to fume and rage when she swept into the room *tirée à quatre* (or even more) *épingles* and looking as for months she had not looked.

The old man's sharp and jealous eyes took in the change at once. "She *cares* how she looks to-night," he thought. "I wonder why?"

He gave her his arm in his usual formal fashion, and they went at once into the dining-room.

"You have a new gown for this occasion, I perceive," he remarked as they crossed the hall. "I should scarcely have imagined it was important enough for so magnificent a toilette."

"The gown," said his wife coldly, "is only an old one made up again by Molly and myself. This piece of brocade," and she touched the lustrous silk almost fondly, "was a gift from her. You need not fear that my costume to-night will be productive of any expense to your pocket, Sir Jasper."

He bit his thin lips. "I'm glad to hear it," he said. "It is about time you learnt to make your allowance meet your expenditure."

"Oh!" said Miss Em, with the old flippancy that he detested; "*that* would be an easy enough matter. Unfortunately my difficulty is to make my expenditure meet my allowance."

He could not reply for they had reached the table, and she took her accustomed place with some of the old mocking defiance in her glance.

"She is always like that when Molly is here," thought the old man, "one abets the other. I've a great mind to forbid them going to-night. No, no soup," he added irritably to the butler, "that fool of a cook can no more make clear soup than fly. You know I never touch it."

"No one can make soup without the necessary ingredients," observed Miss Em, also declining the proffered plate. "The cooking here is expected to be done on the same principle as the Egyptians ordered bricks from the Israelites."

"I never encourage waste and extravagance," snapped Miss Sabina, taking a spoonful of the weak muddy liquid, for appearance' sake.

"You can't encourage what does not exist," observed Miss Em. "Waste, not to mention extravagance, presuppose *something* to waste, or to squander; a microscope wouldn't discover either in the Castle Lustrell kitchens."

"And a very good thing too," interposed Sir Jasper irritably. "One family ruined through extravagance is warning enough of some persons' ideas of housekeeping."

"You wouldn't particularise the *persons*, would you, Sir Jasper?" questioned Miss Em, delighted at provoking a passage of arms. "Hints and generalities are so confusing."

She glanced at the old, wizened, cynical face, aged so much, wrinkled and soured so much, even in this brief year. How hateful it was to her! How she longed to dash his insults back, to spring to her feet and sound the war-note of defiance as once she had deemed it would be so easy to do!

If she only *dared*!

A moment of sharp consciousness showed her Temptation and Danger side by side holding out inviting hands. Then her new unnatural self came to the rescue, and the apparitions fled into the shadowy background from whence they had sprung.

"A letter for you, my lady," said a voice at her elbow. The footman was holding out a salver towards her half apologetically. "The messenger said it was immediate and to be delivered without delay," he added, as he met his master's cold and sternly questioning eyes.

"Excuse me," muttered Miss Em hurriedly, as she turned a little aside and tore open the letter.

It was from Dr. MacShamus. A few lines only, a few lines that seemed to her to run in mad, zigzag fashion up and down the paper. A few lines—well, death-warrants are brief, they say.

"DEAR LADY LUSTRELL,

"Come *at once* to Rooklands. I don't say *if you can*, for a dying man asks for you; he has not long to live, and this is his one cry. I wait for you here.

J. MACSHAMUS."

A dying man asks for you!

She folded the note mechanically. She felt her face growing stiff and cold and white beneath its delicate rouge. How still the room was, and

what a strange song some one was singing! She had been so fond of that song once—a man's voice, tender and low, used to sing it so often. . . .

Was that an elm bough tap, tap, tapping so persistently at the window? . . .

A dying man asks for you!

A sharp thrill of agony pierced the momentary stupefaction. She must act, pretend, scheme, just a little while longer; the curtain could not fall yet, the play was not over. A little while she must hold the stage, and then, nothing would matter, happen what might, nothing would matter any—any more.

"Are you deaf, Emilia? or what is this important message?" asked Sir Jasper sharply. "This is the second time I've put the inquiry."

"I beg your pardon," she answered. "I—I was thinking. Oh! it's nothing important. You needn't wait," she added impatiently to the footman. "But tell them to be punctual with the carriage."

"You kept dinner waiting nearly half an hour," said Sir Jasper, glancing at the timepiece on the carved oak mantel. "Let me see, nine to twelve. You can leave here at a quarter to nine, it will take half an hour to drive, and you are to leave a quarter before twelve sharp; do you hear?"

"I hear," said Miss Em stonily.

"*A dying man calls for you.*" And she must eat and drink, and sit on here listening to this old man's maddening twaddle—this old man, her husband, who had no right to be her husband, who had taken the place of that other. . . . But she must not think, she must not let that weak, strained brain run off the beaten track so long laid down for it.

How her heart beat! it's quick painful throbs hurt her. How long the moments were, how wearily they dragged!

The carriage at last!

She rose with a half-suppressed cry. She was dimly conscious of orders and behests, but they all rang unintelligibly in her ears. She felt Molly's light touch on her arm, the breath of the cool night air was on her face; then the tension snapped. The time for fear was over, and the time for action had come.

"Molly," she cried wildly, "I am not going with you to this ball. I—I cannot. I shall get out of the carriage as we pass Rooklands, and you must go alone. . . . Do you hear, child? . . . I—I *can't* see you." She put her hands to her head in a sudden dazed way. "I've been summoned to some one who is dying—dying, Molly. Some one I used to love when I was a girl like you."

"Oh, my dear, my dear, try and calm yourself. Is it so very bad? Perhaps there is some mistake."

"There was a mistake—once," said Miss Em drearily. "A mistake which set two lives wrong for ever. There is no mistake now, Molly. Go to your ball, my dear, and be happy. All your life is before you; all mine will soon be in a grave."

Puzzled and distracted, the girl knew not how to reply. It was all so strange, so sudden, so bewildering. Rooklands, too, where Denis Morrison lived—Denis Morrison, who they said was to be the hero of this evening's entertainment.

The carriage stopped suddenly. Miss Em had pulled the check-string, and now the door was open and the astonished footman waiting by the step.

"Shall I call back for you?" asked Molly, still bewildered.

"No," answered Miss Em sharply. "I shall be sent back; do not trouble."

She drew her cloak closely round her, and hurried up the avenue with swift uneven steps.

The door was open.

A flood of light poured itself redly over the lawn which led to the great dark mansion.

Miss Em shuddered; it was like blood. A warm bright crimson stream flowing down to her feet.

She hurried in, dimly conscious of a hand that helped her swaying steps; of a voice, the kind cheery voice of Dr. MacShamus, entreating, soothing, explaining.

An accident—a gunshot wound. That was what he said. A gunshot wound, and she had been frivolling with laces and satins, and all the folly and fantasy of millinery, when the sharp crack of a rifle had sounded in the still September air, and meant—*this*.

Oh, foolish, short-sighted mortality that is too clogged and coarse for any prescience of doom! that cannot foresee danger or *feel* peril to the dearest treasure of its heart!

"Calm—I am quite calm, doctor, do not fear. It is not *now* I shall break down or forget myself."

Then she was in a vast dimly lighted room. The scents of chloroform and ether were heavy on the air. Before her, as she stood in the doorway, was a large old-fashioned bed, the hangings all drawn back for air, and lying on it—the handsome leonine head helpless on its pillows—was the stricken figure of a dying man.

Dying? Yes. One glance told her that, even as the heavy glazed eyes met her own—as the arms, helpless now as a year-old child's, stretched themselves feebly towards her in the gathering gloom.

Then one low sobbing cry thrilled the silence:

"Denis, Denis!—oh! my *love*?"

The door was softly closed.

What those two breaking hearts had to confess or to atone for, was not for alien ears to hear!

CHAPTER XXXIX

"THE SECRET IS OUT"

It was scarcely midnight when the Castle Lustrell carriage returned. Sir Jasper and his sister were sitting together in the hall; he moody and absorbed, stretching thin hands to the welcome warmth of the fire; she busy over some coarse wool-work destined to rasp the skin of some grateful, but thriftless, dependant on the Castle charities.

"They are back in good time," she observed, as the man opened the outer door.

Sir Jasper said nothing; his eyes, turned in the direction of the approaching figure, gave one startled glance *beyond* it, then remained fixed on the pale face and wondering gaze of his daughter.

"Why are you alone? Has Lady Lustrell remained on and allowed you to return by yourself?" he demanded in those icy self-controlled tones that betokened intense irritation.

"Is she not here?" faltered Molly, her face and lips growing white as her gown.

"Here? How should she be here before you?" snapped Aunt Sabina, pushing the glasses back from her eyes, and surveying her niece with undisguised astonishment.

Molly still stood there like one frozen into passivity. She seemed lost in thought, only her eyes still glanced here and there as if entreating some one in hiding to come forth and play no more tricks.

"What is the meaning of this? Can't you speak?" thundered Sir Jasper.

The girl started, and the warm colour flushed her face nervously.

"She . . . she did not go to the ball," she faltered. "She stayed—on the way—to see a friend who was ill. I thought she would have been home before this."

Sir Jasper's white wrinkled face took a sudden sickly pallor. He sank into his seat without a word, and Miss Sabina indulged in a prolonged snort.

"I really wonder what next vagary we shall hear of on the part of Lady Lustrell," she remarked. "She gets more eccentric and unaccountable every day."

"Did she tell you," demanded Sir Jasper suddenly, "who had written her that letter?"

"No," answered the girl in the same frightened way.

"Where did she leave you?"

"At Rooklands," answered Molly unhesitatingly.

"What!" thundered Sir Jasper, springing from his seat as if shot. "You're mad, girl; don't tell me she dared set foot *there*! It's preposterous, impossible!"

"Hush, oh hush!" cried the girl in sudden pitiful entreaty. "I hear wheels. She has returned. Don't condemn her until you have heard what she has to say! I am sure she can explain everything."

She did not wait for the ring that might have followed, but flew across the hall and in an instant had the door open, while her glad cry of relief told those waiting beyond *who* it was that stood on the threshold.

Without a word, without the faintest notice of the girl's tender greeting, Lady Lustrell put her quietly aside and moved on up the hall with the slow measured step of a sleep-walker. Her face was ashy white, her eyes had a curious glitter, her hands alone seemed to have any life or movement as they twitched nervously at the fastening of her heavy cloak.

Sir Jasper was still standing in the same attitude.

Miss Sabina, her work resting on her knees, her sharp ill-natured face alert and curious, glanced from one to the other, wondering, if the hour had come at last; the hour for which she had waited so long and so patiently; the hour which should see her enemy overthrown and herself triumphant. Molly, a white trembling figure, hovered in the background, forgotten by all.

A few paces in front of her husband, Lady Lustrell halted. The cloak was unclasped at last. She threw it off with a sudden gesture, and tossed it aside on to the seat upon which Sir Jasper had been sitting.

Something in her face, her air, her very silence, betokened a change. A change such as might befall a prisoner hearing innocence as a verdict after long weeks of suspense; a change such as the announcement of a

victory might bring to the flagging energies of the weary soldier; a change—something indefinable but eloquent—as her eyes met those of the man who had played the part of judge to such a prisoner, enemy to such a warrior.

The hour had come. Miss Sabina was right. The two opponents faced each other for the coming battle, the *last* they would ever fight, the decisive conflict that would henceforth alter their relative positions.

Sir Jasper, with weak-minded fury, made the first attack.

"Where have you been, madam?" he demanded.

"I have been," she said, "to Rooklands—at Denis Morrison's request."

"You *dared* to go there! to that low-born villain's house—against my express commands—against your own promise? You stand there and tell me this?"

Low as muttered thunder, but awful in its intensity of rage, every accent of the old man's voice fell on the ears of the startled listeners.

His wife lifted her head, the light flashing on the beautiful snowy hair and the diamonds that nestled amidst its masses. "Yes; I dared to go there, Sir Jasper," she said quietly. "I would have dared a great deal more than your wrath to give an hour's comfort to Denis Morrison."

"You say this—to me—to my face?" he thundered furiously. "Do you forget the penalty? Do you forget what I told you when I learnt your miserable secret?"

"I forget—nothing," she answered tranquilly. "I will repeat your words for the edification of your daughter and sister. I think they were to this effect: 'If you ever cross Denis Morrison's threshold, if you so much as touch his hand in greeting, I will send you from my roof; I will tell the world you have cheated so long the real history of Peg, the Rake.' Well, Sir Jasper, I *have* crossed Denis Morrison's threshold; I have touched Denis Morrison's hand; nay, more—his lips. More true to him in death than in life, I have come from his side *now*—come here to *you*—and I bid you do your worst. Tell my story to the world—your paltry, miserable world that flatters and fawns on you to your face and mocks at you behind your back! Tell it—cry it from the housetops if you please! I fear you no longer: You are nothing to me—do you hear? *nothing! from this hour!*"

Sir Jasper's face could not grow whiter than it was, but surely never in human voice had malice sounded so deep, hatred so intense, as now sounded in his.

"You are mad to say such things; but I can excuse you to-night; to-morrow it will be a different story—to-morrow when the tale of your shame rings in every decent house. You, the cast-off mistress of a low-born bastard, who schemed and trapped an honest man into making her his wife!"

"Stop!" she cried, for that low moan from Molly cut her to the heart—Molly who, trembling like a leaf, had sunk down by Miss Sabina's side, and buried her shamed young face from sight.

"For your daughter's sake," she went on, the long-restrained passion breaking dangerously into her voice at last, "stop!—I am not what you say! I never was! The secret of Denis Morrison's birth is known at last. He was his father's lawful son—you will all learn that soon. He——"

"I don't believe it! He was a liar, a villain, a blackguard, from his youth up!"

The light stinging touch of a gloved hand smote back that lie upon his cruel lips.

The wild O'Hara blood was up at last, flaming in face, and eye, and stormy gesture of the woman whom long repression had well-nigh maddened, who, in such a moment as this, could count no cost, hesitate at no sacrifice; who would have faced peril, pain, death, unflinchingly, for the one dearly-bought relief of giving rein to the long pent-up passions of her nature. Nothing could have stayed her; not Molly's piteous entreaty; not Miss Sabina's horrified cry; not Sir Jasper's white face of fury; not one or all of these. She seized the diamonds in her hair and threw them at his feet, the costly bracelets on her bare arms followed them, the very rings she tore from her white fingers in the raging, senseless fury that makes unoffending things at times so hateful.

"Take back your gifts, take back everything with which you bought me," she cried. "I warned you once not to try me too far. You stepped beyond that boundary when you called me Denis Morrison's mistress. Hear the truth at last! *I was Denis Morrison's wife!* I was never—yours!"

The blank horror of the silence that followed was only broken by the soft gliding sound of a velvet train sweeping away—away—into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER XL

"OLD SINS HAVE LONG SHADOWS"

THE silence of the room was only broken by a girl's low heart-broken sobs; those terrible sobs that tell of youth's disillusion, and of the horror and shrinking and disbelief that make up the sum total of such disillusion.

On the floor lay the costly satin dress where it had fallen disregarded from the pretty figure, the figure that lay on the little white bed with loose falling hair tossed wildly over bare arms and heaving shoulders—a pathetic picture of sorrow and desolation.

Outside, the unquiet darkness was filled by wild gusts of wind and rain, the clouds chased each other stormily, and through their rents the stars looked out at some chance interval. The trees showered golden tributes over the sodden grass below, the autumn flowers lay wet and beaten across the devastated beds and gravel paths. In the faint east a yellow light touched softly the surrounding grey, powerless as yet to lift Night's dusky curtain from the world where the travail of humanity cried out to heaven in prayers of broken hearts, and lives left desolate cried as Faith bade, as creeds had taught, as misery, even hopeless, unrelieved—impelled.

Some such prayer moaned out at intervals from those girlish lips. "I loved her so! I thought her so good! O God! it can't be true; don't let it be true; better she were mad as they say."

"Molly!" The low pained beseeching in the voice made the girl start; she raised herself on one arm and her wide tear-filled eyes met the quiet steady gaze of what she dimly felt was "sorrow beyond all words."

"Molly, I have come to bid you good-bye; I am going away, I shall never come back here any more. But before I go I should like to tell you something of my story—my miserable story. You will hear it on many

tongues, no doubt; but let me tell you the *truth*, the plain simple truth. Molly, don't cry so! Oh! my dear, I'm not worth your tears, try and think that." She sank slowly down on her knees beside the low white bed; with one hand clasped in the girl's feverish palm she began to speak:

"You heard what I said to-night, Molly. It was true; but I did not know I was *legally* bound to Denis Morrison when I promised to be your father's wife. I was but a girl like yourself when I fled with him from my father's roof, against his commands. Denis Morrison had a bad name here, partly deserved, no doubt, but I was reckless and hot-blooded and self-willed, and I—loved him. God help us O'Haras when we love or hate! Wereck nothing of consequences, and I—I was only a motherless, passionate, headstrong girl; I never thought; I never *cared*. I went to my fate as thoughtlessly as a child to its play, and that fate made me Denis Morrison's wife. We were to go to America, he and I; I had left a note for my father to tell him so. We travelled separately to avert suspicion; but in the same train was a—a friend of mine, the best and truest friend I've ever known; and he saw us and suspected something, and sent a message to my father."

She paused and pushed the thick soft hair from her brow with a sudden weary gesture. "I grow confused; that time was always like a dream, a dream broken in its gladness and beauty by some hideous nightmare. I only know that at Liverpool we were overtaken by my father and this—this friend. There was a dreadful scene. My father called Denis that name you heard to-night—what—what every one here had believed him; but I had never known that, Molly, and the horrible humiliation of it nearly killed me. I—I was so proud, and I had been spoilt and made so much of, and I could not bear to think I had fallen so low as to become the wife of a—what they called him. He did not deny it, even when I entreated. How could he? he never knew the truth himself until his father's death. He was purposely kept in ignorance, because old Morrison hated him for his mother's fault, and on his innocent head visited her sins. Oh, Molly! I can't paint that scene. It was awful, horrible, and he—he was so cold and proud. 'If you cannot trust my word,' he said, 'go back to your father. I have no name to give you, and we are not married, legally—yet.' I started. I could not believe it, Molly; but what did I know of forms and ceremonies, and how could I think his pride was great as my own, or that he wanted to prove my love? Molly, as he said *that*, my father struck him to the ground. I—I remember no more; they took me home again, and he, Denis Morrison, went to America alone. The story of my flight was never known; that friend never betrayed me, but it nearly broke my father's heart. He thought he must have some one to look after me, to watch me in the future, and so he married again, and my life became one of martyrdom and misery. I had blighted all the happiness of youth; I had brought shame and grief on the dear old man whose only fault had been to love me far too well. I had nothing to look forward to, for I could never, never marry; so, at least, I told myself, and so I resolved. I kept the resolution too, Molly, for more than twenty years. And all that time, a lifetime it must seem to you, I never had word or sign from Denis Morrison. I never knew whether he was alive or dead, I thought I had outlived all tenderness, and almost all memory of him. As I grew older and learnt more of life, I taught myself to hate him. I would not, of my own free will, have touched his hand or have

looked into his face again. But also, as I grew older, Molly, I craved for wealth, freedom, luxury, all the good things that other women revelled in, that I must always be denied. I knew that only a wealthy marriage could give me these things, but I shrank again and again from the temptation; at last your father asked me to be his wife. You know what I told you that night, Molly, before I had given my answer. You know a word from you could have influenced me as nothing else could have done. You did not speak that word."

"How—how could I?" sobbed the girl brokenly. "I loved you, I believed in you, I thought we should be so happy."

A shiver ran through the kneeling figure. "Happy—Ah! dear Heaven!—that old dream, that old will-o'-the-wisp, Molly. I was never happy; not for one single hour. Dearly indeed have I bartered the liberty I so long cherished. *Your father learnt my secret*; I will not tell you how; sufficient that he knew it, and used it as a rod of humiliation for every hour of my life here. But for you I could not have endured it; I should have left him, reckless of consequences, but I bore it and struggled on, and thought to live down that hateful past in time. Ah! Molly, old sins have long shadows. The shadow of mine has fallen now; darkly, miserably, never to rise again!"

The grey uplifted face, framed in snow-white hair, the glittering eyes, burning as with hidden fever, terrified the girl. But the old love and pity swept aside all other feelings; the warm trusting young heart cried out in defiance of worldly wisdom, and tried to comfort the distraught sinner whom henceforth all would condemn.

"My dear, my poor dear, how you have suffered!"

"*Suffered!*—my God!"

She rose unsteadily and stood there looking down at the sorrowful young face, held unconsciously by the tender arms.

"Suffering is a wide word, Molly. May you never know it as I have known it! but you never will; you are too sweet and innocent and good. If I could make you happy, dear, I should die content. There is no one in all the world I love, now, beside yourself—I, who but a few hours ago thought that all the worth of life would be mine were I only rich and free. Molly, I *am* rich now. Rich beyond my wildest dreams—the holder of Denis Morrison's wealth. Free, as I have never thought to be free, because I count your father's claim on me as nought. I have all I once prayed for, and it is useless. So are prayers granted. Remember that, dear heart, and now——"

"No, no—*not* good-bye! I can't let you go, I won't let you go. You are ill, fevered, unfit—you must not!"

Slowly, heavily the great tears fell on the girl's uplifted face; tears wrung from the woman's very soul in the keenest anguish that had ever rent it. For this love was pure—a blessing, not an evil—a rest, not a consuming fire; it was the one innocent spontaneous gift that life had ever bestowed on her, and she must put it aside for evermore.

Harder task she had never set herself, harder task she *felt* it was not in life to demand from her again.

"Don't hold me—don't tempt me!" she cried hoarsely, and with sudden fierceness she unwound the tender clinging arms, and with one hurried kiss on the quivering lips she closed their pleading, and went forth carrying her cross of suffering—alone.

CHAPTER XLI

"THIS SINNER WAS A LOVING ONE"

"Miss PEG, darlin', I'm here. It's not for the likes o' me to be expressin' surprise, but whin I got yer summons this mornin', and Biddy the kitchen-maid read out the writin' to me (all printed be thim new-fangled telegram wires, she said) you cud have knocked the legs from under me wid a feather, that you cud. Howsomediver, I jest put up me bundle and laves word for the misthress that I'm off to Dublin to jine ye at the Gresham Hotel; an' here I am alive, faith, an' that jest all, for sich a journey I niver tuk, an' what wid the scraachin' o' that injin, an' the noise an' smoke an' confusion, shure, 'tisn't meself as knows how I iver got here at all. But the saints forgive me for lettin' me tongue run away wid me! What's the matter wid yerself, Miss Peg? yez look white and drawn as a ghost; is it ill ye are, me darlin'?"

"I—I am afraid so, Quinny," came the languid answer—so languid that the very effort at speaking made the white face whiter. "And if I should be ill again I wanted to feel you were near me, you—only you. Don't let any one else come; promise me."

"Shure, an' I won't, darlin', if ye don't wish it. But yer only fancyin' things maybe, an' the journey's upset ye. Let me bring ye a sup o' soup an' a glass av good wine, an' then you jist go to bed an' slape; shure, yer eyes tells me it's not a blessed wink ye've had this last night."

"And for many, many nights before, Quinny. Oh, I wish I *could* sleep. But there, dear old soul, get me what you wish, do what you like. I've a task to accomplish before I rest—I must do it and you must help me."

"Help ye, is it? Shure, Miss Peg, darlin', ye know I'd buy the very gun av ye tould me ye wanted to shoot any one! Help ye! Is there any-thing in the wide world I wudn't do for ye?"

Tears came into Miss Em's dry and burning eyes as they turned to the old woman's wrinkled face. "How faithful you have been always! How little I deserve it!"

"Well, darlin', we won't be talkin' av sich nonsinse now. I'll just go an' ax the waiter for the soup an' wine, an' faith 'tis a different craythur ye'll be after that."

The refreshment was brought and Miss Em took it; the effort was visible enough, but Quinlan made no remark on it. As soon as the last mouthful was swallowed she assisted Miss Em to the adjoining bedroom and made her lie down on the comfortable bed, and covered her up warmly before she departed on that mission which was so feverishly entreated of her.

"Though what she's wantin' wid a lawyer, an' the cleverest an' best in Dublin, she sez, bates me altogether. Maybe 'tis a divorce or a siparation from that ould curmudgeon av a husband, bad cess to him, bringin' a foine woman as she was two years ago to sich a wreck as she is. Ah, 'twas a sorry day whin she married him, an' she'd better have let it alone after all, an' remained a single woman—in spite av the cards."

It was late when the old woman returned from her errand, and brought back the answer to Miss Em's note. She was lying just as she had left

her; the wide burning eyes unclosed and uncalmed by any welcome touch of sleep; the pallor of her face intensified by the two bright spots that spoke of fever even more plainly than dry hand and hurrying pulse.

The effort to rise was so plainly an effort that Quinlan sternly forbade it. "Shure the gintleman can jist do his bizness wid ye here," she said imperatively. "Though 'tis a docthor ye need more than a lawyer, an' a docthor ye'll be seein' before anither hour is over, or 'tis I'll know the rasin why."

Miss Em made no answer. She felt she was very ill, and might be worse, and she could not allow herself to be so until this self-appointed task was done. After that nothing would matter, but she needed all her calmness and all her strength just for a few hours longer.

The lawyer came and found her sitting up in her room beside a table on which were pens, ink, and paper. She impressed him as a singularly good business woman, so calm was her manner, so clear her instructions, so concise and to the point the few questions she deemed necessary.

"You are quite sure," he asked as the deed was drawn up, and the signature alone needed, "quite sure that you care to benefit no one else with this munificent bequest? It is all to go to this young lady—who is no relation—I understand you to say."

"Quite sure. I wish her to have it all. She is of age, there need be no waiting."

"Oh, my dear madam, let us trust for *your* sake there will be. It is not a necessary conclusion to the making of a will that the testator should immediately benefit his or her heirs. No other legacy—except this one to your old nurse?"

"None."

"Then we are ready for signatures."

"You are quite sure it is correct? The money is not *absolutely* mine yet. The formalities may need a week, a month, or even more."

"That is of no consequence. You state—'All I *possess*, or to which I may be entitled at the time of my demise'; that conveys possible fortune that may accrue to you."

"No one could dispute this—upset it; no one who had a spite against me?"

"My dear lady," exclaimed the astonished lawyer, "it is as valid and regular as possible once it is signed and witnessed. We had better have two of the hotel people to do that. Your old nurse benefits under this clause so she must not sign. Shall I ring?"

"Certainly," said Miss Em, the brilliant colour flushing her cheeks with momentary excitement, but her hand steady as a rock as she took the pen from his fingers.

"Ah, so 'tis makin' her last will an' tistayment she is, the craythur," murmured Quinlan, as she received the order and took in the scene with a rapid glance. "Well, maybe 'twill set her mind at ease; I niver remimber seein' her in so moithered a state, an' lookin' so quare an' wild, jist as she did whin she was off her head that time."

* * * * *

"Quinny," said Miss Em, "are you there?"

It was quite dark now, for she would have no lights in the room, only through the open door came the faint gleam of a lamp from the room beyond.

"Shure, me blessed darlin', it's not moved nor stirred I have this last hour. I thought ye was aslape."

"No; I feel as if I should never sleep again; I fear I'm going to be very ill, Quinny."

"Don't be thinkin' ony such thing, darlin'. 'Tis worryin' yer poor brain ye are, an' all for nothing."

"They told me if ever I had a recurrence of that fever, it would mean one of two things—death or madness. Oh, Quinny, I've prayed against *that* horror with all my soul and strength; better to die, than——"

"Ah, musha now, Miss Peg, wid sich talk! dying, not a bit av it."

"Hush, Quinny dear, I—I want to speak to you of—many things; let me say them while I can think clearly. If I should get worse send for Dr. MacShamus; he will understand. Under my pillow you will find a packet of letters, give them to him after I have gone. I want no one with me but you. It is strange, I have always had the idea that I should die—alone."

A bitter cry, quickly suppressed, came from the old woman's lips, falling like a discordant note on the faltering sweetness of the other voice.

"Don't grieve for me, Quinny, you faithful old soul. After all, we had a 'grand time' together as you used to say. And perhaps some one higher than priests or saints won't be as hard on my wickedness and waywardness, as the world. I wish I had been a good woman, Quinny. What was that Molly said to me once?—'You're such a good woman!' I—are you laughing, Quinny?—I tried to laugh, but it *hurt* me. I, who know how wicked and how worthless my life has been. I should like to have been good for her sake. I might have been, once, but I lost my way somehow. There are so many roads in life, and I took a wrong one—and I never got back again."

"Ah, Miss Peg, darlin', don't be breakin' the heart av me wid yer quare talk. Shure, yer an angel of goodness. Sorra a better one I'd nade to show me the road to heaven's glory! Try an' rest yer poor head, an' don't be thinkin' av all yer troubles an' vexations. They're over now. Shure, didn't ye tell me ye'd been left the biggest fortune in the county, an' don't I see ye at the spendin' av it, an' the foine times once more! Dyin', is it? sorra a bit. 'Tis yerself will be laughin' at the very iday in a week's time!"

"Quinny, you're cryin—I hear the tears in your voice."

"Cryin'! not a bit av it, Miss Peg; wud I be cryin' over sich foolish talk? Now close yer eyes, darlin', and I'll jist sing ye to slape as av ye were a little child again in the ould nursery at Carrig-duve."

"A little child! Oh, the weary, weary years! Your arms held me first, Quinny; let them be the last about me when—when I put out on the dark lonely sea. How frightened I used to feel of it once! But I'm too tired now to feel even—frightened. Quinny, it's getting very dark. Fold something cold and tight about my head. Ah, that is good! Now sit beside me and hold my hand—so—and don't loose it, Quinny, until you know I am not talking sensibly any more. And tell Molly I want her to be happy. She will make better use of money than I could ever have done. . . . You'll remember?"

"I'll remimber, darlin'."

"Then, Quinny, kiss me and say, 'God bless you'—*while I know.*"

* * * * *

Fainter and fainter came the broken words, losing purpose and coher-

ence, drifting aimlessly across a sea of troubled thoughts and anxious memories; now steadied by strong effort; again breaking loose from the resolute mooring of the tortured brain.

Long before the kindly voice of Dr. MacShamus had given sad affirmation to the first verdict uttered by a stranger's lips, Quinlan had recognised that nothing could be done.

"I warned her," said the faithful old friend as he stood listening to the feeble voice growing feebler every hour, but never for one moment ceasing its pitiful, monotonous chatter. "I told her human strength could never undergo such another ordeal; and her strength has been taxed beyond even that. I know her life as no one else knows it."

Messages with their note of alarm flew hither and thither; Lady Pat and Miss Bedelia came hurrying to their favourite's side—never again to meet recognition or greeting from those babbling unconscious lips.

Slowly the dawn broke, and the day moved on to eventide. With every hour the sapped, unnatural strength yielded itself to that resistless foe whose strength none may combat.

Once more twilight fell soft as a shadowy veil over the quiet room, touching with tender grace the now exhausted form by which such faithful love still watched, forgetful of life's follies and youth's errors, forgetful of all save the kindly heart and generous nature that were only to be a memory henceforward.

Twilight and grey shadows, and a sudden hushed stillness.

Dr. MacShamus's hand rested with kindly touch on Quinlan's arm as she brought a fresh iced bandage.

"She will not need any more," he said huskily.

Their eyes, tear-filled, but resigned now, turned as by one common impulse to the face on the pillows. A change, subtle, faint, but strangely beautiful, had come over it. Just for one second's space the lids quivered, opened—then fell—curtaining the mystery that the wisest may not know—the mystery that silences even human agony by its whisper, "God knows best."

* * * * *

In the library of Castle Lustrell Molly and Paddy Kearney were standing hand in hand, their faces grave even in the gladness of a sanctioned betrothal, their eyes thoughtfully resting on a letter the girl had been reading.

"Poor Miss Em!" said Paddy at last. "What a strange life, and what a secret to hold in it all these years! But, Molly, darling, what a legacy to leave you! why, you're the biggest heiress in the county. Faith, sweetheart, I'm a bold man to be asking you to marry me."

"But, Paddy, it isn't as if you'd only asked me now. We've loved each other too long for any nonsense of this sort to part us."

"Nonsense? She calls £15,000 a year nonsense! My darling, do you know I shall be the envy of every man who's ever had the felicity of saying good-morning to you? I'm only surprised your father has consented."

"He's too broken down now to care much what I do. I—I don't think he'll live long, Paddy," she went on sadly. "It was a terrible blow to his pride. Oh! how glad I am no one knows it but just—ourselves. How glad I am that she, poor dear, did not commit this sin knowingly!"

"I often think it was just said in bravado," said Paddy gravely, "one of her dare-devil explosions, as we used to call them. You see, the

ceremony of marriage she and Denis Morrison went through was rather strange; and then twenty years' desertion is as good as a divorce, surely. I don't believe she could have upset her marriage with your father, but fortunately there's no need to discuss the point. They're dead now, poor souls; and their suffering and sins are over, let us hope!"

"It seems so strange, that very day when Denis Morrison died, her saying how she had craved for wealth and freedom," said Molly musingly. "And then to gain both, and only know them useless."

"Not quite useless, sweetheart," said her lover gently. "She has made us happy at last; yes, and taught us a lesson too. We'll put this money to a better use, please God, than she might have done. We'll revive the good names of Carrig-duve and Castle Lustrell too, and make them loved and honoured for the sake of poor Miss Em."

"And Quinlan shall live with us," said Molly eagerly.

"With all my heart, but *not* Aunt Sabina, an you love me."

"Oh no," said Molly, laughing. "She bids us good-bye from the moment we are married; poor papa has insisted on that. I shall be the real mistress of Castle Lustrell at last."

"And I," said Paddy, falling on one knee and touching her pretty hand with laughing lips, "your most obedient slave."

"Ah, no," said the girl hurriedly; "even with all I've heard and seen of the perils of wedded life, I want no slave for a husband, only——"

"Only what, sweetheart?"

"A *true man*."

"I can promise to be that, Molly, darling," he said, rising and folding her to his heart with grave tenderness. "God helping me, those sweet eyes shall never shed a tear for wrong or sin of mine. There, no more tears, you've cried enough for one day. Give that letter to me."

"No, Paddy, no; I shall keep it always. It is just as if she herself were speaking to me in every line, just as if her own voice whispered the tale of that warped, strange life. I could never utter harsh judgment of her, dear. Let us only think what once I said to her, 'This sinner was a loving one'!"



FINIS.

Rita

Peg, the rake By 'Rita' [d. i. Eliza Margaret J. von Booth]

London [ca. 1890]

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